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# **Contemporary Art and the Speculative Turn**

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## **Lay Summary**

In this thesis I will explore a recent trend and its relationship with contemporary art known as ‘the speculative turn.’ My analysis of this trend works with the insights of both contemporary philosophy and contemporary art together. Furthermore, I use the work produced within my own art projects to develop this analysis.

This thesis also provides a useful definition of speculation based on an analysis of existing contemporary art and philosophy, and what these things actually do. The definition that I elaborate is that of ‘heresy’ which likens the activity of the social turn to the acts of working outside of the ordained practices of the church by religious heretics and mystics. For these individuals have often created new texts of their own that work *with* the material of their faith in a *different* way.

I also enact this form of speculation by explaining my own work in such a manner. This work shares how I have established a way of looking at the world, and a way of working with artists, which allows me to speculate with them.

## Abstract

This practice-led Ph.D. intertwines a written thesis, a folio of my own curatorial work, and relevant case studies of contemporary art projects: a multi-modal research project that traces the emergence of a ‘speculative turn’ across diverse fields, examining its impact on and through contemporary art.

In particular, it identifies and explores a particular milieu of speculative work concerned with refusing inherited and pre-formatted logics, institutions, values, *doxa*, even metaphysical frameworks, as immutable, natural or perennial. Consequently, I argue that in contrast to a wholly *critical* method, the focus of such speculative work is to *construct*, to *revise* and to *explore*. It enacts a turn away from a perceived *epistemicide*, towards elaborating and experimenting with *unorthodox* vocabularies, concepts, models, and practices. I argue that such unorthodoxies, or *speculative heresies*, are *adaptive navigational protocols* and ultimately expand the parameters of the *Overton window*. They reflect the political, climatological and technical contingencies of a moment that has earned a variety of useful, yet controversial, inter-related designations that each afford different forms of speculative and navigational modelling (‘The New Normal’, ‘The Anthropocene’, ‘The Posthuman Nexus’, ‘The Thick Present’, ‘The Long Now’, ‘The Post-Truth Era’, ‘The Speculative Time Complex’).

As such, this Ph.D. also commits to operate speculatively alongside the work it foregrounds and analyses: *it speculates*. Through my curatorial projects, I offer a unique dynamic model for *thinking with* and *through* contemporary art and the speculative turn. From this model emerges my own speculative cosmology, concepts and vocabulary to be tested both within the analysis of this thesis and the active multi-modal discourse of the milieu I present therein. This is evident in the explication of my project, *Most Dismal Swamp*.



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## 0. Introduction: The Speculative Turn

The explicit and highly varied uptake of speculation as a method, as a theme, and as a *buzzword*, has been increasingly evident among contemporary art projects (and those of various other disciplines) throughout the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (from the late 2000s to the time of this thesis' final submission in 2021). From specialised academic workshops such as the seminal 'Speculative Realism' event held at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2007 to a proliferation of international high-profile art biennals variously deploying 'speculation' as a conceptual and methodological *motif*, the 'speculative turn' has evolved through multiple scales and registers.

This thesis is concerned primarily with the active role contemporary art has played, and continues to play, in this evolution. As an explicit term or as an implicit logic, speculation has persisted throughout the last decade of work in contemporary art, and, significantly, many other fields (related examples that I will discuss include advancements in continental philosophy which are outlined in the following paragraph, the development of 'posthumanisms' through the humanities, and even certain experiments in the commercial field of trend forecasting).

Crucially, this evolution has involved a fundamental re-thinking of prevailing assumptions and orthodoxies - how things *are* is not taken as perennial or natural; how things *can be* are inexhaustively explored and re-configured. It is in this sense that the speculative turn names a *broad* cultural inclination: it exists beyond theory, academia, and technocratic specialisms. It is practiced across scales and registers which suggest now that, to adapt Raymond Williams' well-known phrase, the constitutively *extraordinary* work of speculation is *ordinary*. Examining contemporary art's active role in the speculative turn will prove to validate this statement whilst showing how speculation has gained extensive traction as an interest and as a necessity. For example, in terms of the opportunities it delivers "in the face of the looming

ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world” (Bryant, Harman and Srnicek, 2011: 3).

These latter developments have significantly adjusted the parameters of how we re-think how things *can* or *ought* to be. Foremost across the speculative turn is a turn away from anthropocentrism and towards a *fundamental* reformulation of where the human and social relations are situated within technical, ecological, and cosmic orders. It is this reformulation, and its impact, that is a significant focus of my thesis. Particularly how it is encouraged and mediated through contemporary art. That is, my analysis of contemporary art and the speculative turn tends to follow, and using a diverse array of methodological techniques *unpack*, the definition of speculation proffered by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead:

“The true method of speculation is like the flight of an airplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and again it lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.” (Whitehead, 1979: 5)

Furthermore, when tethered to this recent acknowledgement of the limitations of anthropocentrism, specifically through the arguments of continental philosophy that fall under the banner of Speculative Realism (SR), which I outline in Section 1.1, we can begin to understand that

“human modalities of apprehension and relationality are only one among others that, for all their particularity and dominance for us, have no particular privilege among other modalities.” (Avanessian and Malik, 2016: 4).

Thus speculation, and even ‘*thinking through things*,’ as a form of apprehending and inferring the implications of such alternative modalities, is pursued as a method for parsing, navigating, working through, and working with, the

“Increasing pressure of material, technical and natural processes at the microlevel of personal and even subindividual engagement, the mesolevel of networked social processes, and the macrolevel of the globality of climate change, each of which leads to the weakening of traditional-modern anthropic determinations of these processes, if not the outright subordination or even

elimination of the human as a factor or determinant of how things are with one another, and also of what they mean to one another.” (Ibid.)

Across diverse fields then, the speculative turn manifests as experimental work and practices that refuse inherited and pre-formatted logics, institutions, values, *doxa*, even metaphysical frameworks, as immutable, natural or perennial. From deeply embedded economic and political systems along with their long-standing institutions, to traditional systems of gender identification and sexual orientation, to re-thinking the very category of the human (and a concomitant *humanism*), the speculative turn is characterised by an ambition that is ultimately fastened to the idea of imagining altogether new realities to inhabit (by changing what *is*). The practical focus of such speculative work is then to *construct*, to *revise* and to *explore* with unorthodox alternatives that deny the weight of orthodoxy, the circumscriptive horizon of perceived finitude and the conservation of *the given*:<sup>1</sup> it is the active revision of the Overton window as a possibility space (“a way of thinking precisely about complex situations” (Hillis, 2011)) when such a matrix of *fixed probabilities* is perceived as serving the reproduction of dominant orthodoxies.

The speculative turn is thus presented as the development of experimental *modes of thinking* and concomitant bodies of knowledge (vocabularies, concepts, discourses) that provide navigational opportunities for a historical context that has earned a variety of useful, yet controversial, inter-related designations. These include: “The New Normal” (Bratton, 2017), “The Anthropocene” (Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen, and McNeill, 2011), “The Posthuman Nexus” (Wolfendale, 2019), “The Thick Present” (Haraway, 2016), “The Long Now” (The Long Now Foundation, 1996), “The Post-Truth Era” (D’Ancona, 2017), “The Speculative Time Complex” (Malik, 2016). Speculation is posited as necessary for navigating the complexities and the contingencies inferred by such designations, while such designations are also themselves, speculations. Which is to say, they act as models with which

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<sup>1</sup> “The Promethean trespass resides in making the given” (Brassier, 2014: 478).

complex, multifarious, entangled, planetary-scale, and imperceptible conditions can be mapped and analysed.

The articulation of the ‘speculative turn’ suggests, also, that speculation as a method, is necessary precisely because other, more traditional methods alone (for instance the modes of *criticality* that enjoy an orthodox status within the humanities), are not so well-equipped to parse and navigate the conditions inferred by the above designations. This thesis then defines what it is that speculation offers for such an impasse. Specifically, the tendency towards proposing and *constructing* terms, concepts, images, and models with which to work with, rather than simply denouncing those that already exist. I will be examining examples of contemporary art, especially the milieu of work within which my own projects sit, that contribute to the fostering of a postcritical conceptual thought for apprehending, navigating, and manipulating the real. Furthermore, it is with my own projects presented through this thesis that I am able to test and develop these ideas, and to substantiate a speculative practice. This means that through such projects, I can accumulate and synthesise a glossary of terms, models and concepts consistent with this definition of speculation. Speculation is both a theme and a function of this thesis.

In firstly outlining a schism with what curator Lars Bang Larsen has termed *the long nineties*, I foreground the criteria of a historical and programmatic orthodoxy stemming from the spirit of art’s ‘social turn’ of the 1990s which developed into what I locate as a deeply entrenched and institutionally embodied *Mannerism*. With this inquiry I establish an opportunity to frame the emergence of the speculative turn, at least in terms of its manifestation in the field of contemporary art, as a *combined and uneven heresy*. Furthermore, I argue that this composite heretical response to the perceived orthodoxies sustained by the long nineties forms a *distributed information processing protocol for contemporary art*.

Presenting the emergence of the speculative turn in this way introduces a heretofore unarticulated narrative and analysis of speculation as method and as practice in contemporary art, while resolving initial questions such as: *What* is the speculative turn? *What* isn't the speculative turn? *Why* has it emerged? *How* has it emerged? *Has* it emerged (*is it even a distinct thing, and if so, does it merit significant enquiry*)?

On the one hand, this interrogation offers a *global* view of the speculative turn, which includes outlining some of the definitive generic invariances that appear across the diverse milieu that constitute it, and to provide a broader context for its emergence. On the other hand, in the answers I develop for these opening questions it is acknowledged that I am also opting to proceed with a *partial* perspective which is necessarily informed by particular epistemological framing, methodological commitments, research paths, case studies, and, significantly, my own *situated* position as a curator developing projects with selected artists.

This *multi-scalar* perspective conclusively provides some necessary tools for rigorously theorising the work of the speculative turn (and for critiquing some other attempts to do so). Specifically, the thesis adopts a *socio-cognitive* approach engaged with posthumanisms and related discourses, such as that of 'extended cognition' and a niche anthropological method of 'thinking through things'. The approach proves ideal for theorising a topic that is constitutively exploratory and permissive in its traversal of disciplines, discourses, histories, media and methods. My methodological framework offers formal opportunities to rigorously *think through* and *with* contemporary art, which, I argue, is essential to the core principles of the speculative turn.

Therefore, in engaging selected case studies along with my own folio of practical work, I consciously diverge from the path of committing this thesis' function to an outright art historical *overview*, which I argue would be methodologically inconsistent with both the subject at hand as well as the

requirements of developing a *practice-led* Ph.D. project. Rather than fully embodying a critical distance typical of the long nineties and modernist mannerisms, I demonstrate through this thesis that practice-led research provides an ideal opportunity to advance an analysis that is deeply entangled and intimately embedded among the material culture of a particular milieu; an opportunity to *think with* and *through* the speculative heresies of a distributed scene within the field of contemporary art. Thus, the narrative, conclusions and speculations developed by this thesis extrapolate the logics and *ways of thinking* that I argue underpin the production, presentation, distribution of contemporary art in the speculative turn.

In discussing the entanglement of contemporary geopolitics, technological infrastructure, and our inhabitation of these systems, the sociologist and design theorist Benjamin Bratton argues that

“Today we lack adequate vocabularies to properly engage the operations of planetary-scale computation, and we make use of those at hand regardless of how poorly they serve us... Going forward, we really do need new and better models.” (Bratton, 2015: xviii)

And so this thesis project is an exploration of the models and vocabularies that contemporary art has inherited and also those that contemporary art, through its *speculative labour*, constructs in order to “engage the operations” and to better apprehend the realities of technical, political, and climatological complexities. I will go on to review how such models are produced with contemporary art as a distributed laboratory that socially tests and implements revised perennial images and speculative models that generate new vocabularies for acting with. Furthermore, this is to locate contemporary art within a broader speculative turn that involves influential philosophical movements such as SR (discussed in section 1.1) as well as the uptake in fields such as Speculative Design, which is embodied in high-profile studios such as Superflux whose work similarly commits to “translating future uncertainty into present day choices” (Superflux, n.d.).

## 0.1 Outline of Chapters

### 0.1.1 A Speculative Methodology for Curating a Heresy

The first chapter outlines a methodology, or, what François Laruelle refers to as a “theoretical installation” (Laruelle, 2012: 11). For Laruelle this is the construction of a conceptual or theoretical apparatus with which to approach objects, practices, and discourses outside of philosophy towards the production of a form of thought native to them. However, this does not involve looking immediately at contemporary art examples, nor directly at contemporary art as an abstract idea. Instead, I begin by traversing the influential work of SR and its relationship with contemporary art in order to review how art’s speculative turn has been more popularly considered, before articulating my own response. SR is worth reviewing due to the varied positions it accommodates and their differing commitments. I primarily leverage instructional elements of Quentin Meillassoux’s and Ray Brassier’s work in order to begin developing an argument for contemporary art’s speculative turn as a navigational practice that involves the revision and construction of conceptual schema with which to apprehend reality and manipulate given circumstances.

To do so, I introduce theories surrounding the idea of ‘extended cognition’ with which I situate contemporary art as contributing to and manipulating cognitive ecologies; as a dynamic field of socio-cognitive technologies.

Another significant argument of this chapter, is the articulation of speculation as a method which operates by way of an axiom of heresy, and that such an uptake of this axiom results in what I call an *epistemic long tail*; what Laruelle would refer to as a “modelist explosion” (Laruelle, 2012: 135). This positions those who motivate the work of the speculative turn as working against the effects of a perceived *epistemicide* wrought by the “inadequate” vocabularies and models we inherit or simply “have to hand” (Bratton).



## 0.1.2 Tracing a Speculative Schism

This chapter, which embodies the bulk of this thesis' written component, maps the ideas I have just introduced on to recent activity in contemporary art.

Firstly, I expand on Larsen's review of the long nineties, locating and discussing tangible mannerisms that encapsulate inherited orthodoxies in thinking. Namely, this is found in the perennial ontology of liberal humanism that I argue the speculative turn has sought to overturn and revise. I thus review and analyse in-depth specific examples of methodologies and contemporary art projects that embody such orthodoxies, concluding that, despite rhetoric that expounds otherwise, they contribute to a systemic *cognitive inertia*.

I also continue to discuss in further depth some examples brought up in the first chapter that exemplify a somewhat more established perspective of contemporary art's speculative turn; how they begin to form a *speculative cognitive ecology*.

This then leads me to discuss examples that substantiate my argument for a more precise understanding of the speculative labour of *working concepts* (Canguilhem, 1963: 452) and forging "new and better models" with existing materials. Such revisionary work, I argue, is fundamentally heretical. I utilise as examples projects from my own portfolio and also those from the milieu in which my work operates. Furthermore, I conclude by showing how this work continues through the *invention of a (strange) science*. That is, new models and new terms, refigured concepts and speculative images, are iteratively and procedurally implemented by way of processes of evaluation for their continued deployment as socio-cognitive technologies. I make significant use of Michel de Certeau's notion of *mystics* as a model for this distributed enterprise: "rather than fictionalizing science, a mysticism for today would have to Weird it" (Wilk, 2019: n.p.).

### **0.1.3 Most Dismal Swamp: Dredging a Dank Enlightenment From a Swamp of Heresies (means going in up to the chin)**

Finally, I focus on the practical curatorial projects that are presented in the accompanying thesis folio as *Most Dismal Swamp* (MDS).

The final chapter is not simply a summary of conclusions but rather an embodiment and deployment of them, which also couches the work of MDS documented in the folio. It provides some explication of a glossary of terms and concepts *emitted* (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2018) from the work of MDS while offering the opportunity for this work to continue to act as a *model* rather than a theory: *a space for simulating possibilities; a space for thinking*.

With this kind of end in mind for the thesis, it is significant to note that I begin and end it with a commitment to an embodiment of the ideas it traverses. I present in the following chapters coherent analyses and arguments weighted with evidence, yet I do so with a fidelity to the aim that this thesis will function *speculatively*. Concepts sprout forth from “damned data” (Charles Fort) and from the margins as heresies, as well as from established knowledges that must be continually tested and challenged. When new glossaries and conceptual schema begin to sprout and entangle the path ahead with thickets and vines, traversing such a sprawling swamp of heresies will require the relevant navigational protocols to make it through.



Figure 1.

Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Swamp Protocol* (still), Most Dismal Swamp, London.

## 1. A Speculative Methodology for Curating a Heresy

In this chapter I outline what philosopher François Laruelle refers to in his work as a “theoretical installation” (Laruelle, 2012: 11). For Laruelle this is the construction of a conceptual or theoretical apparatus with which to approach objects, practices, and discourses outside of philosophy towards the production of a form of thought native to them. That is, Laruelle’s theoretical installations are committed to the speculative endeavour of modelling unfamiliar forms of thought. I will detail Laruelle’s approach within this chapter. The theoretical installation of this thesis though, is composed of numerous other discourses with which Laruelle’s approach finds traction. Namely, I will be focusing on work surrounding extended cognition (ExC) and the anthropological project of *thinking through things* (TTT).

In order to position these methods for developing *new conceptual materials* with which to substantiate speculative practices and to understand speculative practices, I will firstly discuss the work of Speculative Realism (SR). Additionally, I will draw closer attention to the work of SR’s rationalist

variants, providing this thesis with tools to properly discuss and examine the role of contemporary art in the speculative turn, and also with the opportunity to approach an undeservedly over-looked branch of contemporary philosophy.

## 1.1 Speculative Realism

‘The speculative turn’ is a term I have acquired from the para-academic margins of continental philosophy (Bryant, Harman and Srnicek, 2011). The term’s provenance plays an apposite role in this thesis’ tracing of a speculative turn in and through contemporary art, as well as more generally.

It methodologically tethers my own use and application of the term to a dynamic nexus of philosophical positions germinating around the label *Speculative Realism* (SR), specifically those that have engaged with a post-Kantian rehabilitation of realism in contemporary philosophy. Which is to acknowledge the possibility of a significant influence and even the transformative impact of SR on contemporary art and its future (Malik, 2015). In terms of recognising the challenges SR provides for the gamut of “critical orthodoxies” that have defined the humanities through the twentieth century, contemporary art’s adjacent role in broadening the speculative turn has been heretofore under-researched and inadequately theorised (Cox, Jaskey and Malik, 2015: 15).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cox, Jaskey and Malik (2015) suggest the critical orthodoxies which have come to dominate the humanities are “staunchly anti-realist” in that they fundamentally insist upon natural and social phenomena as “*constituted* or *mediated* by a discursive field or a cognitive subject.” Nothing exists for this orthodoxy beyond the spheres of discourse and their social context. Thus, the theoretical doctrines that have come to dominate how we think and how we apprehend the world are those that are essential to the dogmatic entrenchment of the experience of the subject as the only accessible measure of reality: phenomenology, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis.

Artist Amanda Beech notes that what has emerged from such doctrines in terms of the “orthodoxies of critique” of contemporary art is a dominant proclivity for ““social engagement,” ‘good political practice,’ ‘participation’” (Beech, Canini, Fisher, Grant, and Mackay, 2010; n.p.). I will discuss these in greater detail, as orthodox mannerisms in recent contemporary art, in the following chapter.

In order to correct this, I will be working from an assembly of *specific* propositions and *selected* philosophers' work that have emerged from and around SR (as well as its broader genealogy). This is because, as has been recognised by anyone introducing the work of SR in numerous articles, essays and press releases, as a label it acts as an umbrella term for a divergent set of philosophical positions. However, what has also been frequently recognised, is that these positions also tend to diverge from a common attempt to overcome what Quentin Meillassoux has crucially named "correlationism" in the seminal text, 'After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency' (Meillassoux, 2008).

With this neologism, Meillassoux identifies a deeply embedded and coercive modern orthodoxy; "the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant" which has marked realism as a naive pursuit and presented the finitude of subjective phenomenology as the only measure of the world one may know (5). For by 'correlation'

"we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other... Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object "in itself," in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always already be related to an object." (5)

To work towards thinking what-is apart from how it is perceived by a subject (beyond "factuality" or the transcendental structure of what is empirically given); to break out of the "correlationist circle" (7), Meillassoux interacts with ancestral statements of the like that the Earth was formed 4.56 billion years ago (14), for such statements refer to scientific realities untethered from the dependency of a human-world correlation. In pursuit of this noumenal access, Meillassoux constructs a heuristic index of ancestrality, a thought-experiment he names the "arche-fossil" which designates

“not just materials indicating the traces of past life, according to the familiar sense of the term 'fossil', but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life. An arche-fossil thus designates the material support on the basis of which the experiments that yield estimates of ancestral phenomena proceed - for example, an isotope whose rate of radioactive decay we know, or the luminous emission of a star that informs us as to the date of its formation.” (Meillassoux, 2008: 10)

So Meillassoux argues to convene with the Real<sup>3</sup> on the basis of a scientific, and later in his text a mathematical, rationalism: forms of logic that simultaneously grant cognitive ingress to temporalities outwith phenomenological formulation and confound the correlationist dogma

“that there can be no cognizable reality independently of our relation to reality; no phenomena without some transcendental operator – such as life or consciousness or *Dasein* – generating the conditions of manifestation through which phenomena manifest themselves” (Brassier, 2007: 51).

It is essential to introduce correlationism and its rejection, both as a defining characteristic of SR's positions and as a key moment in the development of the speculative turn. It was around this rejection, along with the repudiation of limitations set by the dominant mannerisms of the *linguistic turn* in the humanities,<sup>4</sup> that Meillassoux gathered with Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant and Graham Harman (with moderation by Alberto Toscano) to form the foundational conference *Speculative Realism* in 2007. Here, these philosophers introduced their related yet distinct ongoing projects that variously “problematize[d] the subjectivistic and anthropocentric foundations of much ‘continental philosophy’” (Brassier, Grant, Harman, Meillassoux, 2007: 307).

While Meillassoux here continues his project of “building a materialism – or realism – able to refute clearly the correlationist circle... the argument that we never have access to something apart from that access” (426-7), Brassier discusses the challenges faced in building such an edifice which would demand

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<sup>3</sup> Or, in closer correspondence with the ‘speculative materialism’ advocated by Meillassoux, the Real as indexed by materials and the realities known by such.

<sup>4</sup> See footnote 2.

“some kind of communication... between the speculative audacity which is characteristic of so-called ‘continental philosophy’ and the really admirable level of engagement with the empirical sciences which is a feature of the most interesting work being done... with cognitive science” (320-1). For Brassier, as I will discuss in the following section, finds in the sciences the opportunity to transform conceptual parameters and develop a mode of reasoning which permits a break in the correlationist circle:

“For surely it is not just ancestral phenomena which challenge the latter, but simply the reality described by the modern natural sciences *tout court*. According to the latter, we are surrounded by processes going on quite independently of any relationship we may happen to have to them: thus plate tectonics, thermonuclear fusion, and galactic expansion (not to mention undiscovered oil reserves or unknown insect species) are as much autonomous, human-independent realities as the accretion of the earth” (Brassier, 2007: 60)

### 1.1.1 Speculative Realism and Contemporary Art

Rather than presenting either a generous outline of each position represented at the SR conference, or indeed a caricature, it is relevant to direct focus towards more specific positions adopted by Brassier and Meillassoux. It is essential to bear in mind the remit and the focus of this thesis. It is not of primary concern here to evaluate SR’s claims with the forensic and specialised rigour of a philosophy thesis, nor to test the more specific claims of Meillassoux et al. against one another.<sup>5</sup> This brief introduction to SR functions rather as a gathering of key terms and arguments that have motivated the growth and uptake of the speculative turn, and also to acknowledge that SR,

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<sup>5</sup> Although I am differentiating various strands and practices of SR, what this thesis is not doing, is differentiating them to a degree that would require moving the focus away from their application and development through contemporary art. This thesis is not the venue to test, to the fullest degree, the differential inferences of Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, Brassier’s rationalistic naturalism, Harman’s object-oriented ontology, or Grant’s materialist idealism. Nor even the broader categories to which these positions are often tethered, neomaterialism and neorationalism. Instead, it is of greater importance to discuss how these positions have been taken up by contemporary art, which supposes a more productive and experimental form of cross-contamination.

regardless of its academic or institutional value, was undoubtedly received and often explicitly cited by contemporary art as a major interest, especially c. 2010-15.<sup>6</sup> What is imperative here is to track, contextualise and analyse trends in recent contemporary art that has contributed to the speculative turn *alongside and with* SR (whilst acknowledging significant genealogies for both: historically situating the speculative turn as converging from an uneven and combined stemma of attitudes and discourses distributed across diverse fields, rather than a sudden, arbitrary and singular event).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, as evidenced in the case studies of my own projects and the work of others throughout this thesis, contemporary art is considered here to proffer contributions to the speculative turn without the guidance of a position defined by any philosopher(s). A significant reason for making this point is that actual examples of contemporary art in SR's literature are thin at best, even in texts produced by those who work as or with artists.<sup>8</sup> Therefore this thesis takes further the suggestion that "art is then not

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<sup>6</sup> Among the wealth of exhibitions and biennals across the globe name-checking Speculative Realism, as well as its uptake in various journals and magazines (many of which commissioned SR philosophers such as Graham Harman and Timothy Morton to write short texts (Harman, 2014; Morton, 2015), one unusual example of SR's traction is to be found in Art Review's inclusion of SR at No. 81 in their 2013 'Power100.' The feature is updated and presented annually as "a ranked list of the contemporary artworld's most powerful figures."

<sup>7</sup> "It began not with a whimper but a bang" is the phrase used by by Rick Dolphijn in his review of Peter Gratton's 'Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects,' which echoes many other introductions to SR that present the 2007 conference as a kind of ground zero (Dolphijn, 2014: n.p.). However, the phrase *is* somewhat apposite in its depiction of SR's exponential uptake and the impact of SR on a scale broader than most developments in continental philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> Publications such as Speculative Aesthetics (Mackay, 2014) and Realism, Materialism, Art (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015) provide many theoretical challenges and postulations worth considering for contemporary art and its future. However, this is done with very little, if any, reference to actually existing contemporary art examples, and a significant knowledge of contemporary art in general (although various images by relevant contemporary artists are included in the publication Realism, Materialism, Art, none of the essays therein directly reflect on them). It is common to refer to examples such as Marcel Duchamp (Beech, 2015); Malik, 2015) and Robert Smithson (Trevatt, 2014), who are nonetheless pivotal figures with artworks worth discussing in such contexts, yet they are not illustrative of contemporary art, nor art generally simultaneous with SR discourse. In Art Review texts by Morton and Harman, samples offered include M. C. Escher and, somewhat more presciently, a recent film by Lars von Trier. However, I will also go on to acknowledge, with reference to Malik's work, the opportunities this might have in terms of operating with and from abstract terms in the use of inferential reasoning to construct new possibilities; to speculate.



just a field transfigured by realism and materialism; it is also a method for convening *and* extending what they are taken to be and do when extended beyond philosophical argument” (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015: 15). But, to be clear, any debt to the work of SR is indeed acknowledged, specifically in this thesis’ exploration of artist and theorist Amanda Beech’s discussions on “how art thinks” which, on the face of it, at least rhetorically plays off of SR’s known tendencies to ascribe some form of independence, agency or indeed animist vitality to nonhuman matter.

Among the most visible of contemporary art projects that have responded to SR-related proposals in one way or another are exhibitions of such prominence that it is easy to conclude that SR, and the turn of which it is a significant part, has indeed enjoyed a sharp uptake. Familiar to many is *DOCUMENTA (13)* curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in 2012, which brought an *object-oriented* thematic to bear on international contemporary art, enacting a “vibrant materialism” (Mulholland, 2019) through a wealth of historical artworks, new commissions, sacred objects, eco-architectural prototypes, publications, letters, lemonade stalls, borrowed objects, scientific projects, geological samples, video footage of protests, and found objects. As Christov-Bakargiev explains, this heterogeneous assembly aims to incite “a more balanced relationship with all the non-human makers with whom we share the planet and our bodies” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012: 34).

Section 2.2 discusses in greater detail such examples of SR’s integration with contemporary art which have evidently tended towards exploring the implications of Object Oriented Philosophy (OOP) espoused by Harman as well as Levi Bryant and Timothy Morton. These explorations tie in with a modern history of art’s concerns regarding some relative autonomy of art objects, the imbrication of art and life,

and/or the limitations of human perceptual affordances. Furthermore, they reflect a growing interest in the social sciences regarding the questioning of a divide between things and people; between nature and culture. This trajectory could be mapped according to the literature that engages with materiality according to its social, relational and/or biographical ‘life’ (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987; Strathern, 1988; Latour, 1993; Gell, 1998). And also to more *posthumanist* discourses that seek “to enhance the status of things, not by associating them with humans, but in their own right, showing how, suitably reconcieved, things can radiate light of their own” (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 202). Drawing from this lineage and its eruption through the experiments of OOP, further contemporary art projects to be discussed process the current relevance of animist worldviews, enchanted objects, de-anthropocentrism/human exceptionalism, anonymous materials, quasi-objects and the expanded networks and ecologies of subjects, objects and environment.

Additionally, from this trajectory of contemporary art and SR’s imbrication, it has been noted that the memetic popularity in projects exploring OOP has meant comparatively less interest in exploring the challenges and implications of “the more staunchly rationalist versions of speculative thought associated with Brassier and Meillassoux” (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015: 27). It is here that this thesis project finds an opportunity to contribute to an under-researched area. While I examine the speculative turn and its relationship with contemporary art, I do so with a methodology that at once gains insight from the work of those who have developed the so-called ‘neorationalist’ branch of SR, and, offers this discourse opportunities to develop in and through contemporary art (how contemporary art and its recent developments are best considered from such perspectives; which projects are relevant and how; what impacts each may have on the other).

Projects such as *dOCUMENTA (13)* work towards making visible “a space of relations between people and things” in order to parse and explore an expanded “political space were the *polis* is not limited by human agency only”

(Christov-Bakargiev, 2012b: 15). Thereby, some work is done in terms of presenting an image of the world, even *ourselves*, (in all its political, technological, and climatological complexities) that is divested of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. But, to what extent can these assemblies of things<sup>9</sup> cohere, as envisaged by Christov-Bakargiev in her curatorial “choreography”<sup>10</sup> of the centrally-located (at the traditional locus of Documenta exhibitions, the Fridericianum) collection of extremely disparate objects, as a “Brain”<sup>11</sup>? That is, in employing the exhibition format (in terms of what it is, but also, crucially, what it might *be*) I will follow the rationalistic naturalism of Brassier in “that humans are not *necessarily* the privileged bearers of rationality (antihumanism); that humans may not be the *only* rational agents (trans-humanism); that rationality may *extend itself* through post-biotic systems (post-humanism)” (Brassier, 2015: 220).

How do contemporary artworks fit into this scheme? Can they? Might objects (in the broad sense of Christov-Bakargiev’s heterogenous “participants”), or indeed exhibitions, be likened, functionally, to Meillassoux’s arche-fossil, or the findings of “modern natural sciences” (including the concept of extinction (Brassier, 2007: 231)) alluded to by Brassier, in terms of providing a sufficient cognitive heuristic framework to “elaborate how thought can think outside itself, how reason can think nature as a whole” (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015: 22)?

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<sup>9</sup> In a commissioned interview for the *dOCUMENTA (13)* series of publications, artist Paul Chan suggests, following Latour (Latour, 2005), that “a thing is not a thing but an assembly of relations” (Farquharson and Wilson-Goldie, 2012: n.p.). Among this expansive assembly of things-as-relations included bottles painted by Giorgio Morandi, 4,000 year old figurines known as the Bactrian Princesses, objects found in the apartment of Adolf Hitler, photographs of bomb-craters in Vietnam, experimental models created by the physicist Anton Zeilinger, and many more.

<sup>10</sup> “The choreography of *dOCUMENTA (13)* is instead un-harmonic and frenetic, while also producing some *shared understanding* of this condition through alternative alliances and bonds” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012b: 4, emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> It would be easy to register the opening sentence of Christov-Bakargiev’s statement-essay, ‘The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time’ as art-world hyperbole: “documenta is a state of mind” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012b: 4). But, following the rationalistic naturalism or materialism proposed by Brassier and Meillassoux, there is an opportunity to start to treat this suggestion with a sense of literalness.

In section 1.3 I introduce the premises for answering these questions. I look towards theories of Extended Cognition (ExC) in order to argue for a model of “cognitive stimulation” (Wolfendale, 2019) leveraged by contemporary art. A kind that is engaged in processes of *abductive cognition* through the (collective)<sup>12</sup> building and reformation of *mental models*. And in section 1.4 I will introduce the speculative function of contemporary art (remembering that speculation is a mode of *thinking*, an *abductive cognition*) that will be elucidated throughout the thesis, with attention paid to the artistic mode<sup>13</sup> of reclaiming, revising, testing, and engineering *concepts*, and conceptual

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<sup>12</sup> By this I mean to infer that the work of contemporary art (its discourses, trends, memes, values, and indeed the mental models it presents) *is* a collective effort, yet this is not to be taken as a harmonious, concerted, preconceived, or consensual project.

Like sciences, humanities, and myriad other disciplines, conflict, agonism, discussion, experiment, and *speculation* is embodied in a field’s tentacular, de-centred and diverse makeup. It is composed of various institutions, milieux, individuals. This might be an obvious point to make, but, certainly in contemporary art discourses anyway, it seems far too easy to project a singular direction or common sense, especially when it confirms the biases of the writer. Also, contra the work of writers such as Beech, Malik and Negarestani who bring the challenges and opportunities of SR upon contemporary art, I do not treat art as an abstract category but as a situated and active constituent of a cognitive ecology (see Section 1.3).

<sup>13</sup> To better qualify this ‘artistic mode’ in order to avoid romanticising and obscurantism, we might best think of the processes of making, distributing, and discussing contemporary art as “manipulative abduction... [a] *thinking through doing*... [an] action-based cognition” (Magnani, 2013: 51). Therefore this involves all of the embodied orthodoxies that sanctify contemporary art and its contingent methodologies through its multifarious educational, social, and professional systems and institutions. Edwin Hutchins’ publication *Thinking in the Wild* (Hutchins, 1995) is a touchstone work in the development of ExC and its variants, in that it proposes that cognition is a social enterprise where cultural activity systems possess additional cognitive properties of their own, but, I mention this to highlight that this “thinking in the wild” is not intended to be considered as a “wild” form of thinking (the connotations wrongfully bring to mind an irrational or feral intuition). The kind of thinking beyond the brain, beyond thought, pursued here, is that which is still constructed via normative constraints that extend navigational, rational, and manipulative capacities. In terms of “how thought [can] conduct itself in art” (Küchler, 2001: 57), I will go on to consider contemporary art’s collective development and revision of mental models, as well as condering contemporary artworks and their distribution as *stigmergic phenomena*, where “stigmergy is the phenomenon of *indirect communication mediated by modifications of the environment*” as a means of sharing and processing information outside of the brain/body and across time (Sun, Marsh, and Onof, 2007: 136).

schemes, with which to “extend” rationality. To this end Brassier conjectures that:

“There is no cognitive ingress to the real save through the concept. Yet the real itself is not to be confused with the concepts through which we know it. The fundamental problem of philosophy is to understand how to reconcile these two claims. We gain access to the structure of reality via a machinery of conception which extracts intelligible indices from a world that is not designed to be intelligible and is not originarily infused with meaning. Meaning is a function of conception and conception involves representation—though this is *not* to say that conceptual representation can be construed in terms of word-world mappings. It falls to conceptual rationality to forge the explanatory bridge from thought to being. (Brassier, 2011: 47)

To establish some reconciliation between the two initial claims Brassier looks to contemporary neuroscience, which examines the human biological machinery in a realist manner that is “indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable” (Brassier, 2007: xi). And so in neuroscience’s disenchantment of deeply-held ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ (such as the neurological fabrication of selfhood (Brassier, 2011; Metzinger, 2009)) characteristic of Enlightenment rationality,<sup>14</sup> Brassier finds “not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity” (Ibid.). Which is to say that among the “speculative anomalies thrown up within the order of phenomenal manifestation, and the metaphysical quandaries generated by the sciences’

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<sup>14</sup> Brassier aims for his work to offer a “much-needed corrective to the tide of anti-Enlightenment revisionism with which so much twentieth-century philosophy has been complicit. The disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment.” However, it might be somewhat more useful to consider a renewal or even a *mutation* of enlightenment according to our ‘axiomatic heresy’ (See section 1.2). Such a heresy might follow science’s disenchantment with a humanism incompatible with the findings of contemporary neuroscience (see section 1.4 on Thomas Metzinger’s “Enlightenment 2.0”) which, for example, *revises* the centrality of human experience by positing a “methodological nemocentrism” (Metzinger, 2003: 628) which throws up the possibility of a post-self subject, a subject “not accompanied by the phenomenal experience of *being someone* (336, emphasis added). Brassier goes on to suggest that such a post-self subject would be “a physical entity gripped by concepts: abridge between two reasons, a function implemented by causal processes but distinct from them” (Brassier, 2011: 33).

challenge to the manifest order,”<sup>15</sup> Brassier explores the *conceptual resources* needed to exceed conventional and intellectually debilitating folk-psychological, folk-semantic and correlationist forms of knowledge: the tools with which to speculate; for “overcoming of the opposition between reason and imagination: reason is fuelled by imagination, but it can also remake the limits of the imagination” (Brassier, 2014: 487). To crystallise a new possibility space (composed of a renewed suite of concepts; a reconfigured *episteme*) through navigating counterfactual alternatives.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Critical to the work of Brassier, and to the present discussion on revising *doxa* with the ‘speculative anomalies’ delivered by sciences, is the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars’ description of the manifest and the scientific orders, or images of man. The manifest image is the result of “using reason first to develop a picture of the human and its community, and then to develop a picture of the world that correlates with this community of thinkers” (Gratton, 2014: 137), which marks this self-conception and its projection in to the world as inherently correlationist. The scientific image, however, is that which continues to overturn this self-conception and its consequences by committing to discoveries that de-centre the position and status of the human being in the world. So, the significance here is not the destruction of the manifest image, but a more heretical form of *revising* it, and to defy its primacy in the order of conception. Brassier foregrounds the opportunities available when we “shuttle back and forth between images, establishing conditions of transposition, rather than synthesis” (Brassier, 2007: 231).

<sup>16</sup> Among the various media and elements that constituted *Script for a Machine Synthesis* (2015) by artist Florian Hecker (stage setting, sound design, perfume, vocal synthesis) was a libretto written by Reza Negarestani. Here, an adaptation of Wilfred Sellars’ thought-experiment concerning a pink ice cube in which we “[s]uppose a virtual cavity, a local discontinuity in the homogenous body of pink. The pink is no longer through and through since, by way of a thought experiment, we have generated a cavity, a locus of inhomogeneity in it. This virtual cavity is a source of designated instability, a site for deployment of our manipulative abductive agents. We have thus catastrophically rearranged the parameters responsible for the behaviour of the system, the pink ice cube. Tendencies, ramification and navigation pathways liberated by this catastrophic reconfiguration reveal new salient points about the behaviour of pink across the structure of the ice cube” (Negarestani in Hecker, 2015: 4). With this image Negarestani illustrates the speculative tendency to not simply explore a given possibility space but to *maladapt and intervene productively within an existing dynamic system of material and conceptual possibilities*. The virtual cavity that possesses the ice cube is then a vital figure denoting something significant enough to gain purchase within the existing structural properties of a system (ice cube) to tailor its navigational dynamics (its pinkness, the speed at which it melts): “But rather than counting as an impediment, the obstruction enriches the navigation map of the chromatic demon and diversifies the conceptual behaviour of pink throughout the ice cube” (6).

With this in mind I argue for a kind of “choreography,” as espoused by Christov-Bakargiev, but instead of drawing together wildly heterogeneous artefacts with no *explicit* agenda (*dOCUMENTA (13)* rejected the supposed constraints of a “preconceived curatorial concept” (Schoene, 2012: 36) in favour of a more open space of object-oriented relationality)<sup>17</sup>, I will go on to discuss a kind of conceptual choreography<sup>18</sup> that might forge the kind of “explanatory bridge” suggested by Brassier as a “cognitive ingress to the real”. In particular, I focus on instantiating Brassier’s assertion that “conceptual representation” is not to be “construed in terms of world-world mappings,” by considering contemporary art as the memetic development, testing, and distribution of speculative *models*.

## 1.2 The Speculative Turn is an Uneven and Combined Heresy

It is through such models that this thesis argues the *heresies* of speculative thought are given substance and value:

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<sup>17</sup> In chapter 2 I argue that this approach is similar to that of the social turn and to ‘the long nineties’ where exhibitions bring together participants within a social space as an exploration of social relations and their organisation. This in fact belies a more insidious form of ‘curatorial concept’ that I will discuss also.

There are other examples that bring heterogeneous materials and ‘participants’ together where a ‘pre-conceived curatorial concept’ is advantageous to the production of a space that *does* foster new ideas beyond that of illustrating an ideological form of openness, such as the 1985 exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, curated by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the 2005 exhibition *Making Things Public* curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, and also *The Institute of Cultural Anxiety* presented at ICA, London in 1994 curated by Jeremy Millar.

<sup>18</sup> Following the critique of ‘openness’ proposed in the previous footnote, my own use of the term ‘choreography’ differs somewhat from Christov-Bakargiev’s. In her curatorial statement-essay she emphasises the qualities of choreography that are more “frenetic” than they are concerned with a rule-bound “harmony” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012b: 4). However, in my suggested mode of ‘conceptual choreography,’ which again, follows the logic of heresy (See 1.2), I do not oppose one set of constraints with that of a delirious uncertainty, or as Malik would describe it, an “axiom of indeterminacy” (Malik, 2013). Rather, the labour of speculation is the provision of alternative normative constraints to direct and motivate such exploration. This is speculation as a navigational practice.

“Heresies is understood here to have a different meaning [from the mere critique of received ideas]... [T]he issue is not one of critique (pretending to stand outside of the institution) or criticality (shifting the parameters within the institution), but about *inventing new terms* that defy the odds. ... [T]he aim is not to put forward new opinions (doxa), but of *regenerating knowledge* (episteme)”. (Martinon, 2013: 9, emphases added)

The SR-adjacent philosopher François Laruelle (the formal approach of whom will be discussed below) posits heresy as a practice “of transmutation or transvaluation,” “rather than apocalypse” (Laruelle, 2012: 280). Which chimes well with the above quotation from curatorial theorist Jean-Paul Martinon in the sense that we can get a sense of heresy as a practice not of critical destruction, but rather of speculative (re-)construction.<sup>19</sup> In chapter 2, for example I discuss how speculation in contemporary art does not re-iterate the destructive (Laruelle’s ‘apocalypse’)<sup>20</sup> impulse of critique by condemning the institutionalised practices of criticality that have become orthodoxy (Beech, 2007; Beech, 2018; Malik, 2008; Malik, 2015a; Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015), but instead follows a “transvaluation of critique” (Chandler, 2018). And, in chapter 2 I unpack this kind of heresy further and explore how it is embodied through contemporary art in relation to Michel de Certeau’s conception of *mystics*,<sup>21</sup> a “new science” formulated through the work of Christian mystics (de Certeau, 1992: 11).

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<sup>19</sup> “Deconsecration assumes the legitimacy of the consecrate - only a re-consecration can achieve what’s needed here” (Shipley, 2015). See Section 1.2.2a for my inclusion of Shipley’s work in my *Exta* project.

<sup>20</sup> This wording is instructive in the sense of apocalypse relating to a revelation or unveiling, as well as the character of critique as a mode of something similar: “Using the vast range of structuralist, post and post post structuralist tools and models of analysis we have at our disposal, we have been able to unveil, unravel, expose and laybare the hidden meanings of cultural circulation and the overt and covert interests thatthese serve” (Rogoff, 2006: 7). Whereas both heresy and speculation is a *constructive mutation* or *transvaluation* of such conditions.

<sup>21</sup> On the use of this word in its italicised form, which I adhere to throughout this thesis: “The theme of Michel de Certeau’s Mystic Fable is *la mystique*. This term cannot be rendered accurately by the English word “mysticism,” which would correspond rather to the French *le mysticisme*, and be far too generic and essentialist aterm to convey the historical specificity of the subject of this study. There is no need here to retrace the steps by which *la mystique*, the noun, emerged from the prior adjective, *mystique*. But it may be of some interest to note that this grammatical promotion has its parallel in English, in the development of such terms as “mathematics” or “physics,” fields of inquiry of increasing autonomy, also taking their



These are figures whose unorthodox practices and religious lives often provoke condemnation by their church. In his two-volume analysis of 16th and 17th century Christian mysticism, 'The Mystic Fable,' de Certeau uses the term *mystics* (*la mystique*) in the delineation of a field of practice to be understood in terms of systematic disciplines such as physics, mathematics, or optics. Among the aspects of *mystics* that de Certeau outlines, attention is paid to it as "a manner of using received language differently" (de Certeau, 1992: 16). It is this (mis)use of the established language, symbols and concepts of their faith that marked the mystics as heretics: those who defy the orthodoxy of the church not by any desire to destroy it (nor to trespass the will of God) but to transform and mutate the *institutional* narratives and practices that dominate their spiritual life. Their heresy was thus not destructive in character, but speculative. Such transformations were practiced through a radically intimate commitment to their faith; an immersion into the ecstasy of divine communion that the church saw as undermining their authority as mediator of the gospel. Sense and thought disoriented in the ecstatic intoxication of divine experience. Religious doctrine tainted with *mystics*' use of the deviant views of science, philosophy and direct, personal experience. However, it is to be made clear that de Certeau's *mystics* is here used as a *model* for contemporary art's speculative turn as a programmatic *uneven and combined heresy* (that, as it did for the spiritually consumed mystic, reconfigures fundamental 'values' and 'meanings'; their *manifest image* of the world), and not a direct comparison for contemporary artists that might romantically re-iterate art as ineffable or mystical (in an obscurantist sense of the word): no "world-world mappings" as Brassier says above of such conceptual representation.

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names from an adjectival forerunner. I have, therefore, *in extremis*, adopted the bold solution of introducing a made-up English term, *mystics* . . . to render *la mystique*, a field that might have won (but never did, in English) a name alongside metaphysics, say, or optics" (Smith in de Certeau, 1992: ix-x). "[A]nd it tends to define the status of a discourse or a science in its own right that will be referred to by a new noun, *la mystique* [*mystics*]" (de Certeau, 2015: 112).

For instance, in a theoretical reflection on what a non-correlationist logic would infer for art by art theorist Suhail Malik (Malik, 2015b), it is suggested that a “rationalist SR” (188) provides opportunities to speculate on “what an art other than contemporary art could be” (189). By foregrounding the core generic trait of contemporary art as the “aesthetic experience” which “depends upon its receiving subject, the addressee of the work, who is taken to constitute it rather than arrive as latecomer after its production,” (185) Malik determines its fundamentally correlationist character (that he elsewhere calls “the interpretive paradigm of contemporary art”). That contemporary art is made for a subject to *experience* and thus to complete its production by allocating meaning or functionality is what renders it as a mode of correlationism, and is thus now liable to be set in relief against the profoundly *unorthodox* (perhaps even unthinkable, seeing as Malik can only provide a tentative historical example)<sup>22</sup> alternative of a *non-correlationist* art that works “against the primacy of experience as condition for definition for art”(Malik, 2013: n.p.).

Malik does however narrow the scope in terms of what such a regeneration of art does *not* look like. He too refers to *dOCUMENTA (13)* as emblematic of projects that mobilise OOP and thus still positions a viewing, interpretive subject (even if placed on the equal footing of a ‘flat ontology’) within an ecology of participants (subjects, objects) interacting via aesthetic experience (Harman, 2007). For Malik, this is not enough to initiate a substantially non-correlationist art. And so he looks to Brassier and Meillassoux’s variants of SR which as well as demoting anthropocentrism in the apprehension of the real, theoretically “removes subjective interpretation or experience as a condition or

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<sup>22</sup> In an earlier version of this essay published in Spike magazine Malik writes, “there is no need to find artists, curators, critics making “SR art” to justify, to ground, or lead the investigation. What it imposes, and what corrodes the interpretive paradigm of contemporary art as well as its concomitant soft heroism of artistic, curatorial, or interpretive anti-systemacity, is art as a rational exercise that eviscerates all lingering experiential conditions.” (Malik, 2013: n.p.).

telos of the artwork, and therewith collapses the entire edifice of the contemporary art paradigm” (Malik, 2015b: 188). In this postulation (indeed, this *speculation* arrived at via rational inference) “art [when it is] responsive to this theoretically-led imperative would be indifferent to the experience of it” (189), which is certainly a step beyond heresy towards outright hostility against contemporary art as it is presently manifest. And so, although Malik infers a strong argument that outlines what a non-correlationist art would do when logically mapped and scaled directly to the non-correlationist philosophy of “rationalist SR,” to collapse the edifice of contemporary art’s interpretive paradigm would surely demand a kind of speculation that navigates contemporary art in such a manner that is not ‘theory-first’ as his argument is. I will return to Malik’s argument in chapter 2 where his postulation operates less as a rule for contemporary art but as a kind of navigational protocol. It is with Malik’s (perhaps impossible) challenge to contemporary art that we may better see some of its deficiencies and inhibiting orthodoxies; that it may provide some conceptual resources to act with the contemporary art forms we have *now*.<sup>23</sup> That is, Malik’s argument might be better read as a use of rationalist SR to produce a speculative future for art in order to write its present: it need not be a correct forecast in order to provide resources from a theoretically contingent future for art.<sup>24</sup> Also, it can be said that Malik follows Brassier’s prioritisation of

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<sup>23</sup> However, this is a productive (mis)reading of Malik in light of the current model of heresy. Especially in light of his appeal for art to “exit” the strictures of contemporary art (Malik, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> A useful concept to consider here is something that Malik along with many others mentioned throughout this thesis have shared an interest in, which is *hyperstition* (Avanessian and Malik, 2016a). I will not be discussing the full provenance and development of this term - it is enough for this thesis to simply note that its distributed evolution has taken place through experimental discourses that combine fiction, art, music, and philosophy (see below of Negarestani’s work of theory-fiction for example). A para-academic project beginning in the mid-nineties known as the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit suggested that hyperstitions are “fictions that make themselves real” through a nexus of circulation, distribution, and social valorisation. The term has been used to describe the re-arrangement of the present by the future, which might provide some motivation for Malik’s inferred future for art. Practically speaking, this inferred future might also act in the way that Rosi Braidotti describes the speculative articulation of a posthuman entity not as a verifiable or accurate extrapolation of the present (nor as fantasy or science fiction), but, crucially, as a “navigational tool” (Braidotti, 2015). That is, a model. As Avanessian and Malik put it: “It is the outside or the future that recursively rearranges the past, retrieving it

inferential reason over empirical experience as a means of *constructing* generic coordinates for an art that does not follow what he defines as “contemporary art,” and might thus engender “art’s exit from contemporary art” (Malik, 2013). However, I will go on to follow a course of enquiry that treats contemporary art as already presenting a multi-modal space of abductive inference with which to take up Malik’s challenges.<sup>25</sup>

And so, in returning to Whitehead’s assertion that

“The true method of speculation is like the flight of an airplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and again it lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (Whitehead, 1979: 5)

we can find in Malik’s speculation the parameters for contemporary art’s “renewed observation.” Contemporary art may find here some “new terms” with which to enact heresies on current orthodoxies. This (as well as the definition of heresy provided thus far) is aligned with what artist and theorist Amanda Beech sees as motivating her ongoing interest in SR, that it’s abductive inferences afford tools for

“the construction of another language, that demands to be negotiated again. Which is what I’d see as the optimism of SR: the possibility of recoding and revising and reconceptualizing what we might have ever thought to have been

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otherwise than how it has shaped the present in order to open up another future than one that has been given by the past” (Avanessian and Malik, 2016: 12).

<sup>25</sup> “...non-linguistic practices can draw up inferences... independently of language. Although the inferentialist premium on discursive practices privileges the game of giving and asking for reasons, this game is not only or exclusively realized in specifically linguistic discourse. The category of discursive practice is broader than that of linguistic practice” (Brassier in Brassier and Malik, 2015: 230) Furthermore, while Malik’s manner of speculation is not to be devalued, I find that contemporary art fosters its own capacities to speculate: while some of the orthodoxies in contemporary art that I go on to discuss in chapter 2 certainly do work in the favour of conserving inherited, even out-dated, concepts and worldviews, some of those working across the speculative turn, as suggested, are involved in a heretical revision and reclamation of concepts for discovering more speculative trajectories. Yet regardless of which of these two positions that I am focusing on in the much broader field of contemporary art, they are emblematic of cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch’s insistence that “concepts and categorisations only occur in *concrete* complex situations” (Rosch, 1999: 76).

manifest in the first place. So it doesn't move away from the idea of the given and the manifest, but thinks about the rearticulation, the reconfiguration, of what that might be." (Beech, Canini, Fisher, Grant, and Mackay, 2010: n.p.)

But, even though Malik's inferential postulation of a non-correlationist model for contemporary art, and SR in general, affords such possibilities for 'recoding and revising and reconceptualizing' or even 'collapsing' edifices such as that of art's paradigmatic orthodoxies, it is worth re-iterating the unique propositional value of contemporary art as a field of thinking participants. Even the initial proposal for this thesis, as submitted to the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities and University of Edinburgh, sought to correct a "trivialisation" and "biennialisation" of SR that saw the invocation of "an already established canon that is not representative of the true extent of SR- practices, nor of SR's profound implications for contemporary aesthetics."<sup>26</sup> This is indeed something I have continued to examine, yet, with an attunement (or a re-tunement) to the likelihood of something more akin to a *mutual* recoding, revising and reconceptualisation between contemporary art and SR; that its influence is significant yet not unilateral and results in a mutual "reconstruction of the disciplines" (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015: 30).

Contemporary art provides an opportunity to open up the speculative turn beyond the remit, codification and valences of philosophy, and *vice versa*. And, to go a step further, this kind of cross-pollination and disciplinary superposition highlights the contingent orthodoxies of both, motivating their speculative work to take place in unorthodox manners, in unorthodox spaces (see footnote 36).

While the connotations it has earned from contemporary philosophers and those engaged with SR are significant and influential, 'the speculative turn'

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<sup>26</sup> My earlier criticism of this trivial thematising of SR rather than taking up the fundamental challenges of its philosophies has been echoed in the introduction to the publication *Realism, Materialism, Art*: "...we should anticipate not only new themes for art practices, exhibitions, and cultural production, but also starkly different ways of making, perceiving, thinking, and distributing them" (Cox, Jaskey, and Malik, 2015: 30). This is still the case for the present project, as evidenced in my adoption of ExC alongside SR as a means by which I conduct analyses as well as develop practical work such as the projects of *Most Dismal Swamp* (chapter 3).

actually marks a much broader cultural inclination towards speculation; towards creating and exploring possibilities beyond the circumscriptive protocols and cognitive affordances of a variety of perceived cultural *orthodoxies* - akin to the “critical orthodoxies” noted above (see footnote 1). Not just those found in a single discipline. The orthodoxies that this thesis locates in fields such as contemporary art are enabled by and reflect deep-seated, widely instantiated *doxa*.<sup>27</sup>

Across diverse fields then, the speculative turn manifests as experimental work and practices that refuse inherited and pre-formatted logics, institutions, values, *doxa*, even metaphysical frameworks, as immutable, natural or perennial. From deeply embedded economic and political systems along with their long-standing institutions, to traditional systems of gender identification and sexual orientation, to re-thinking the very category of the human, the speculative turn is characterised by an ambition that is ultimately fastened to the idea of imagining altogether new realities. The practical focus of such speculative work is then to *construct*, to *revise* and to *explore* with unorthodox alternatives that deny the weight of orthodoxy, the circumscriptive horizon of perceived finitude and the conservation of *the given*.<sup>28</sup> it is the active revision of the Overton window as a possibility space (“a way of thinking precisely about complex situations” (Hillis, 2011)) when such a matrix of *fixed probabilities* is seen to serve the reproduction of dominant orthodoxies.

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<sup>27</sup> That is, what in Bordieu’s terms self-evidently represents “the universe of possible discourse” (Bordieu, 1972: 167). From here, I will represent the dynamic, discursive and therefore *potentially flexible* nature of this universe of possible discourse with the notion of the *Overton window* - a tool conceived by public policy specialist Joseph Overton (further developed and named by his colleague Joseph Lehman). The Overton window denotes the range of ideas considered acceptable for public discourse. For an idea to be politically viable, even conceivable, it must be within that range, which has become known as the Overton window. It marks the challenge for policymakers as not so much passing laws, but moving ideas into that window. Therefore, the significance of this idea for me also lies in considering contemporary art’s role in both maintaining and altering the parameters of the Overton window.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 14. Brassier also tethers the aforementioned practice of revising what is *given* or *manifest*, in terms of a political project comprised of his renewal of *prometheanism*: “The Promethean trespass resides in making the given” Brassier, 2014: 478).

Thus, crucially, it is also a turn towards elaborating and experimenting with radically *unorthodox* vocabularies, concepts, models, and practices as a means to revise the orthodox affordances of a possibility space, or, in more sociological terms, the discursive terms of the *Overton window*. I argue that such unorthodoxies, or *speculative heresies*, are *transformative navigational protocols* and ultimately work towards expanding the parameters of the Overton window in order to cultivate a *cognitive ecology* that is in tune with, and apprehensive of, the radically multi-scalar political, ecological, and technological realities that constitute and impact life on earth.

The speculative turn is an uneven and combined heresy: it is multi-modal and distributed, and as such, nurtures “more heterodox, and dynamic categories” (Rosler, 2010: 118)<sup>29</sup> with which to think beyond what is immediately sensed by our limited biological faculties alone, beyond the realm of subjective experience, and beyond what is understood as *given*. It is at once what Arjun Appadurai has described as “imagination as a social practice” (Appadurai, 1990: 5) and what I posit as the categorical reformulation of what the ‘social’ now means, concomitant with a reformulation of fundamental categories such as ‘human’.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This what Martha Rosler suggests is a defining characteristic of Feminism’s achievements: that it inherently worked to “rethink *what* and *who* an artist is and might be, what materials art might be made of and what art *meant*” towards effecting heterodox replacements for singular and sacred, inherited dominant categories that oppress emergent possibilities. This is key to the logic of speculation, and thus also highlights the actively speculative character of Feminism’s projects. One such project in recent years which makes this connection explicit is that of Xenofemism which seeks to invest in a reformation of the faculties of reason and enlightenment principles which it views as being neglected by more traditional forms of Feminism: “Reason, like information, wants to be free, and patriarchy cannot give it freedom.” The Xenofeminist collective, Laboria Cuboniks, attempt to wrest the development of reason from powerful systems, looking towards the possibilities for its future development, and revision, engendered in the exclusion of women, non-binary folk, and those further along the *long tail* of difference: “Instead of eliminating differences between genders, we want them to proliferate. Let a hundred sexes bloom!” (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> In section 2.2.2 I map this reformulation on the contemporary art’s uneven and combined interest in ‘the body’ and ‘the body politic.’ The revision of such fundamental, even sacred, categories is a keystone of the discourses of posthumanism, a further genealogical touchstone

### 1.2.1 The Speculative Turn is a Long, Long Tail

The term ‘speculative turn’ also points towards a formally *transdisciplinary* approach embodied by the methodological, discursive, and distributive architecture of SR. SR disregards the perceived boundaries separating analytic and continental branches of philosophy (especially the work of Brassier and latterly Reza Negarestani), and even assembles its discourse through the conceptual materials afforded by various strands of biology, cognitive science, neuroscience, ecology, finance, chemistry, astrophysics, quantum physics, cognitive psychology, mathematics, fiction, and art (which goes some way to accounting for the SR variants noted thus far). This permissive cross-pollination of concepts and materials not only expands the terrain of these disciplines and creates fertile partnerships, but has evidently produced a *long tail* of experimental and obscure sub-fields including dark materialism, theory-fiction, xenofeminism, dark ecology, venomenology, sonic fiction, hyperstition, cosmic pessimism, accelerationism, Shoggothic Materialism, and borromean critical theory<sup>31</sup>.

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for the speculative turn. This is so in their shared understanding of the human as a contingent category that is shaped and reshaped according to nonhuman environmental and technical factors. Art’s relationship with such concerns have been explicit since at least the exhibition *Post Human* (1992) curated by Jeffrey Deitch which sought to explore what “new kind of ‘person’” emerged from human entanglement among new technologies and their trajectories. Among more recent proliferation of morphological speculations that work towards expanding the Overton window of how bodies, subjectivities, minds, etc should be thought of include the accelerated, hyper-condensed and networked techno-mashups of Ryan Trecartin (Åkervall, 2016), the granular gut-brain-AI oracles of Jenna Sutela, the digi-queered bodies of Jacolby Satterwhite (Burrows and O’ Sullivan, 2019), the neurodivergent chimeras of Andrea Crespo, the ‘Economystical Cybermedieval’ RPG characters of ¥€\$Si Perse, and the bestiary of avatars that populate the transmedia fiction of Plastique Fantastique.

<sup>31</sup> See the 2011 conference *Dark Materialism* at Kingston University, London; seminal theory-fiction experiments such as Negarestani, R. (2008). *Cyclonopedia*. Melbourne: Re.press; Cuboniks, L. (2015). *Laboria Cuboniks | Xenofeminism*. [online] Laboriacuboniks.net. Available at: <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/> [Accessed 01 Feb.2019]; Morton, T. (2018). *Dark Ecology*. Columbia: Columbia University Press; Fox, D. (2012) *Venomenology*. In: Masciandaro, N. and Negarestani, R. eds., *Glossator*, Volume 6. New York: Glossator, 121-122; Eshun, K. (1998). *More brilliant than the sun*. London: Quartet Books; anon. (2017). *CCRU Writings 1997-2003*. Falmouth:



Therefore, in an already splintered ‘field’ such as SR, this long tail that extends out towards uncharted, unexpected and unorthodox territories further suggests the importance of this thesis locating, defining and paying attention to a specific milieu, or “scene,” of participants around contemporary art and the speculative turn. I use the term scene after artist and theorist Simon O’ Sullivan, who further complicates this situation by using the phrase in a Deleuzoguattarian sense to suggest that a scene “need not involve more than a single individual” (O’ Sullivan, 2016: 83).<sup>32</sup> The implication here is that one may construct, or “fiction” (to use another term associated with the work of O’ Sullivan (Burrows and O’ Sullivan, 2019)) a scene, and perhaps even entire philosophical programs or sub-fields as above. I argued for such a possibility in the first term of my Ph.D. candidacy with a paper that charted various artists utilising fictional avatars as “semi-autonomous speculative agents, or as epistemico-morphological prostheses” (See Appendix 1). For instance, in Negarestani’s theory-fictional text *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Negarestani, 2011) the fictional entity Dr. Hamid Parsani allows Negarestani to combine philosophy, occultism, international relations, horror and fiction to produce and discuss altogether new arguments and concepts such as “hypercammouflage” (61), “hidden writing” (61), and “hyperstition” (9). The invention of Dr. D. C. Barker (who is a descendent of Deleuze and Guattari’s Professor Challenger, who had also been appropriated from the fictions of Arthur Conan Doyle - O’ Sullivan refers to this as the “nesting” of fictions (O’ Sullivan, 2014: 4)) and the fictional study of “geotraumatism” explored by

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Urbanomic; Thacker, E. (2020). *Cosmic Pessimism*. [online] Continentcontinent.cc. Available at: <http://www.continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/84> [Accessed 15 March. 2018]; Mackay, R. and Aanesian, A. (2014). *Accelerate*. Falmouth: Urbanomic; Woodward, B. (2011), *Mad Speculation and Absolute Inhumanism: Lovecraft, Ligotti, and the Weirder of Philosophy*, *continent*, 1.1, 3-13; Bryant, L. (2013) *Politics and Speculative Realism*. In: Austin, M., Ennis, P., Gironi., Gokey, T., Jackson, R., eds., *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism*, Volume IV. New York: Punctum, 15-21.

<sup>32</sup> “The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us were several, there was already quite a crowd” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). See the work of Jenna Sutela discussed in 2.3 which also re-configures the liberal humanist image of the singular, discrete individual as a dynamic and multi-scalar microbial open system.

philosophers Nick Land and Robin Mackay. The artist project, *Plastique Fantastique*, made up of O' Sullivan along with David Burrows (and various others from 2005 to the present day) has often constructed avatars that consist of elements of living individuals, myths, commodities, animals, sacred objects, memes, and assorted materials (if the aggregate 'Brain' of *dOCUMENTA (13)* was endowed with a voice and a character it might resemble one of these avatars) who forward the transmedia narrative of the overall project, exploring posthumanism, contemporary technology, magic, ritual, counter-culture, and politics. And the Confraternity of Neoflagellants, whose theory-fictions set in the multi-dimensional and post-Westphalian 'mall' are populated by a dynamic bestiary of characters that embody, perform, and explore the concept of neomedievalism along with posthuman corporeality, transtemporalities and temporal anachronism, hypereconomy, and "relic-ing" (Hogg and Mulholland, 2013: 110).<sup>33</sup>

This long, long tail of experimental, hybrid and even fictional ways of thinking and practicing around new concepts and terms serves to exacerbate, to the nth degree, Laruelle's suggestion that "only heretics have both philosophy and religion, philosophy and science together at their disposal" (Laruelle, 2012: 284). Which is to suggest that acts of heresy are those that not only cross between the boundaries of disciplines but also utilise their materials towards "inventing new terms" and "regenerating knowledge" (Martinon). An example of this seemingly flagrant practice being used in the rationalist manner of a "science" is that of Laruelle's chief accomplishment which is the development of non-philosophy: "a use of philosophy that remains constitutively foreign to the norms and aims governing the properly philosophical practice of philosophy" (Brassier). In the following chapter I discuss and exemplify through works of contemporary art Laruelle's practice, with regards to the re-

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<sup>33</sup> Such fictions have been used throughout the history of science also, whether in thought experiments such as Maxwell's Demon and Donald Davidson's Swampman, or as in the "Zarathustrians," a fictional alien race in the popular science literature of Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart that in their words were used "to jog us, and our readers, out of the safe, familiar, parochial way of thinking...to push our minds in new directions, to stimulate lateral thinking" (Cohen and Stewart, 1994: 51).

invention of concepts: a re-use of language concomitant with that of de Certeau's *mystics* (particularly in Laruelle's construction of "mystic fiction," a kind of *superposition* of philosophy and mysticism)<sup>34</sup> and the inferential production of a syntax native to such nascent conceptual schemes.

I thus suggest that the speculative turn constitutively enacts a turn away from a perceived *epistemicide* ("the killing of other knowledge systems" (Hall and Tandon, 2017)) and instead explores the valuable contingencies eclipsed by resilient orthodoxy and dogma. The diverse work of the speculative turn, considered as a variously collective, differentiated and distributed activity, cultivates an *epistemic long tail*. Such a long tail might indeed be authorised by a commitment to the progressive-humanist 'decolonisation of knowledge,' yet

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<sup>34</sup> Just as in his "use of philosophy" in the construction of an experimental science of philosophy (or, as has been suggested by Laruelle, the making of "art with philosophy" (Mackay, 2012: 29) with the treatment of philosophy as raw material), that he calls non-philosophy, his "mystic fiction," or non-mysticism "takes mysticism and mystical language as its raw material" (Laruelle, 2007: 258). Laruelle's interest in the language and resources of *mystics* is apparent in the non-philosophical scheme of appropriating and re-deploying philosophy, ultimately towards a "re-vision of what counts as thought, taking it well beyond the hype of philosophical mastery and into a materialism that sees philosophy as only one kind of thinking" (Ó Maoilearca, 2015). One way in which Laruelle manages this is through a "superposition methodology" drawn from quantum mechanics as an alternative to the orthodoxy of dialectical logic (Gangle and Greve, 2017: 9; Laruelle, 2012: 239). This follows the constructive possibilities of conjugating distinct subsystems or texts or forms of discourse in the production of *new suites of concepts* and *new ways of thinking that emerge from the material* (as opposed to the tradition of philosophy exerting *its* way of think upon other areas whether this is art, mysticism or indeed any other topic. Laruelle refers to this latter exertion as the "Principle of Sufficient Philosophy" which Laruelle contends is common across all philosophies regardless of their allegiances to a materialism, idealism, transcendentalism, immanence, etc. and ineffectually tends to accord a higher status than that of (the revisionary capacities of) reason (Laruelle, 1999: 139). And non-philosophy seeks to afford such materials the opportunity to insist on their own conceptual schemes (See also discussion of TTT throughout). As philosopher John Ó Maoilearca puts in his *An Introduction to François Laruelle*, "In place of seeing philosophy go to the Real (with its categories, its concepts, its wisdom), from an outside, transcendent, position, we reorient ourselves to see philosophy coming from inside the Real" (Ó Maoilearca, 2015: 174) which is to describe non-philosophy's concept of "unilateral duality" (Laruelle, 1999: 143), a kind of immanence from the Real that suggests "thinking is everywhere" (Ó Maoilearca, 2015: 175) by acknowledging the propositional potentiality of all (matter) that is *outside* of philosophy, and which sits *alongside it* in the Real (philosophy is but *one* experiment in thinking. Again, see TTT for a similar treatment in anthropology).

also a deeper kind of decolonisation that attends to a profoundly broader conception of what knowledge *could* be (rather than inheriting a singular idea of what it *is*) and the attendant possibilities of its production; “to construct other theoretical images of theory” (de Castro, 2014: 77). (Here, the anthropological work of Eduardo Vivieros de Castro that assumes the “permanent decolonization of thought” (40) through the supposition of the real by “treating indigenous ideas as concepts” (187).) This speculative long tail is then an enriching “cognitive exotica” (arguably even a “conscious exotica”) (Shanahan, 2016) that widens the parameters for what thought is, what it can achieve and how thinking operates.<sup>35</sup>

Speaking at the first annual Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2017, Kodwo Eshun (whose work will be discussed further below and in the following chapter’s “Interlude” section) shares an illustrative account of what I am calling the epistemic long tail, and how it is instantiated as an uneven and combined heresy. In calling to mind the diverse explosion of speculative work circulating and germinating through para-academic hybrid spaces such as The New Centre for Research and Practice as well as minor enclaves such as artist-run galleries, chat servers, zines, and raves, Eshun extensively lists:<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> It is not a key example to be analysed further, but given the discussion thus far on *dOCUMENTA (13)* it is worthwhile to note The 14th Istanbul Biennial, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms* also curated by Christov-Bakargiev, which is ostensibly an attempt to combine art with “other knowledges” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2015: XLIII). This suggestion, combined with the biennial’s title, which refers to a 1901 publication by the Theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, is emblematic of an uptake of occulted and unorthodox systems of knowledge. Furthermore, the display of drawings from this publication alongside scientific drawings of synaptic connections, *Thalamic Afferent Axons in the Human Cerebral Cortex* by Spanish neurobiologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal as well as other neurological experiment documentation and neuro-aesthetics materials, is notable at present for the potential resonances between this esoteric spiritualism and a science dedicated to the disenchantment of prevailing assumptions regarding how we understand ourselves. Something akin to, or on the way to approaching, Laruelle’s superposition of philosophy and *mystics*.

<sup>36</sup> What de Certeau refers to as “privileged spaces” for the social practice of *mystics* – the circulating forms of minor or popular communication – can here be likened also to the para-academic organs of discourse such as Punctum and Collapse who are committed to publishing and circulating experimental research and literature beyond the perceived strictures of the academy: “Para-academia is parasitical upon, and convergent with, the academy, forming an addendum or paragon constitutive of academic practices. Para-academia, thus conceived, is a commoning counter-strategy to the enclosure of knowledge” (Mulholland, 2019b: 61-62)

“the differentiated positions and the antagonistic alliances and the factional forces of the CyberGoths that move through the calendrical systems of templexity; the CyberFeminists that situate themselves in the time streams of patriarchy; the AfroFuturists that hack the systems of chrono-power and chronography; the Speculative Realists that dismantle the barriers to the Great Outside; the Hauntologists that diagnose the ‘slow cancellation of the future’ in order to dismantle its enforced depression; the Eliminativists that dismantle the coordinates for experience; the Accelerationists that aspire to decode flows; the Left-Accelerationists that seek to build a stack whose platform logics generate our entrenchment; the Right-Accelerationists that summon the Basilisk; the Unconditional-Accelerationists that seek to dis-couple themselves from the Left and from the Right; the students of Black study who argue that, ‘being black is a thing you can only do with others. I don’t know that it’s possible to be black by oneself, insofar as being black, or black-being, is a necessarily, irreducibly social thing that is general and that is ongoing’; the #AltWoke that write, ‘our amorality isn’t a bankruptcy of ethics so much as an emotional discipline in response to global existential threats. A learned stoicism and pragmatism is crucial to #AltWoke’; the Mundane AfroFuturists that claim, ‘WE ARE NOT ALIENS’; the NeoReactionists, engaged in promoting highly advanced drastic regression; the Xenofeminists that’s announced that ‘Xenofeminism indexes the desire to construct an alien future with a triumphant X and a mobile map. This X does not mark a destination. It is the insertion of a topological keyframe for the formation of a new logic’; the Black Feminist Poethicists that know that studying Blackness announces the end of the world as we know it; the Prometheans that ‘consider revolution not as a passionate attachment to some flash of negation but as a process of undoing the abstract social forms that constrain and humiliate human capacities along with the political agencies that enforce those constraints and humiliations; the Forensic Architects that ‘invert the direction of the forensic gaze’, that seek to designate a field of action in which individuals and independent organisations can confront abuses of power by states and corporations in situations that have a bearing upon political struggle, violent conflict and climate change; the Inhumanists that argue that the universal wave which erases the self-portrait of man drawn in the sand, that Inhumanism is a vector of revision that relentlessly revises what it means to be human by removing its supposedly self-evident characteristics while reserving certain invariances; the AfroFuturists 2.0 that assert the social physics of Blackness; the AfroPessimists that assert ‘the slave’s cause in the cause of another world in and on the ruins of this one in the end of its ends; the Black Quantum Futurists that work on the temporal dynamics of retro-currencies, of backward happenings - an event whose influence is not discrete and time-bound but extends in all possible directions and encompasses all possible time modes; the Black Accelerationists that argue that, ‘binding Blackness and Accelationism

to one another proposes that Accelerationism always-already exists in the territory of Blackness whether to knows it or not. And conversely, that Blackness is always-already Accelerationist'; the Gulf Futurists that emerge from 'the isolation of individuals via technology, wealth and reactionary Islam, the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on earth, the erasure of history from our memories and our surroundings, and finally our dizzying collective arrival in a fire that no one was ready for; the SinoFuturists that argue that 'SinoFuturism is an invisible movement, a spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals'." (Eshun, 2017)

Even this impressive roster of activity is representative of but a mere sample of a flourishing speculative long tail. Eshun talks specifically of work that has pertained to the fractal milieux surrounding himself and colleagues such as Mark Fisher. To show how broadly the speculative turn sweeps we might refer also to the seemingly infinite recombinant field of experimental political ideologies formulating among a younger generation of online personae, as compiled and studied in-depth by artist Joshua Citarella.<sup>37</sup> Or, the matrix of "memetic tribes" that entrepreneur and podcaster Peter N. Limberg has catalogued as constituting a recent "culture war 2.0".<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Eshun's, Citarella's, and Limberg's samples of this long tail also demonstrate the point made in this thesis' introduction. That speculation is ordinary. For what the invocation of a long tail proposes is that though there may be an intense multitude of varying perspectives, cultural codings, and emerging communities, to say that they simply occupy the margins of social life akin to what one might call a 'subculture' is inaccurate. The long tail is a model that accounts for a swathe of difference distributed across a broad, substantial population.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "Politigrammers revel in adding as many prefixes and suffixes to their ideology as possible. Sometimes I think there are as many ideologies as there are members of Politigram. Some of the more unusual titles I've come across; National Trotskyism, Dharmic Eco-Reactionaryism, Libertarian Neo-Monarchism, Traditional Primitivist Caliphatism, Christian Bolshevism, the list goes on..." (Citarella, 2018: n.p.)

<sup>38</sup> Limberg maps not only the names of movements and ideologies proliferating with the aid of online communications but also their forebears, media "campfires" around which they collect, the mental models they adopt, the "sacred values" around which they coalesce, and the diverse political teloi they each envision in Limberg's Google Document (Limberg, 2018). See also Limberg and Barnes, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> The model is exemplified somewhat in the Occupy movement's refrain, "We are the 99%".

Whether some of these marginal subfields, micro-genres, or tentative subculture-like movements are in fact short-lived expressions of an interest in generating new terms and arguments with which to expand the Overton window or if they have some lasting impact such as SR has achieved, Eshun goes on to affirm that

“Each of these neologisms are actually forms of life. Each of them is the names of and for aesthetico-political positions that operate by disagreements and differentiations, that make claims that must be argued. Each of these is not so much a term as a war of and over interpretation, the stance that aims to intervene in cultural politics, that fashions itself to articulate a discontent, to focus despair and depression into theories to live by, theories that are embodied, theories that live in us and through us and with us and on us.” (Eshun, 2017)

The “disagreements and differentiations” by which they come to be, indicate their position within the broader cultural inclination towards speculation that I mention above. They are the result of “discursive practices [that] constitute the game of giving and asking for reasons and outlining the space of reason as a landscape of navigation rather than as *a priori* access to explicit norms” (Negarestani, 2014: 433), and thus such neologisms are not simply a form of posture but indicative of multi-modal cognitive processes involving (re)generative combinations of disciplinary resources; of “multiple activities of *modeling* between philosophy and science, philosophy and art, leading all the way to risking a *model-ist explosion*” (Laruelle, 2012: 135, emphases added).

It is efficacious here to consider this speculative long tail as an eruption of models (for “forms of life,” for possible futures, for counterfactual alternatives to the “despair and depression” administered by the given) by which orthodoxies and given conditions are speculatively re-worked. Models are precisely manipulable “technologies of investigation” (Morrison, 1999: 32) that afford their users ways of understanding and insights that may not be achievable through other means (for example, weather patterns are more

accurately understood and predicted through modelisation rather than observation).<sup>40</sup>

This is also how we might appreciate Eshun's characterisation of each "term as a war of and over interpretation." Limberg's directory of political ideologies sets this idea in sharper relief. It sets out a range of political 'tribes' along with the various factors by which each constructs and maintains an operative model of the world (such as what they believe, their political aims, and who their political and theoretical forebears are). And for each tribe Limberg also lists the mental models they adopt as a means for understanding their environment, constructing arguments and theories, and for setting aims (see footnote 38). However, this 'war of and over interpretation' is something that has been rendered much more mundane and insidious for decades by the critical humanities. One example of work that aims to forge a new model for apprehending the realities of human conception and reproductive biology is anthropologist Emily Martin's *The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles* (Martin, 1991).<sup>41</sup>

In the second half of chapter 2 I elaborate contemporary art's role in the (re)formulation of such models with which to generate and exemplify new terms and concepts. Specifically, how notions of 'the body' and '*mystics*' have proved, in the view of this thesis, valuable for a certain milieu in contemporary

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<sup>40</sup> Statistician George E. P. Box famously stated that "all models are wrong, but some are useful" which lends further weight to the consideration of each of the neologisms catalogued by Eshun as representative of a model, in that as collectively constructed shared technologies of investigation they each carve out a "cognitive niche" where through their native prostheses, or "epistemic mediators" (whether this might be a physicists simulation programme or an art work), problems can be approached and an image of the world can be (re)produced (Magnani, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Also, considering the *socio-cognitive* and *eco-cognitive* perspectives embodied in this thesis, this kind of conflict between orthodoxies and their alternatives, and between the varying alternatives themselves, could be described in terms of "eco-epistemic warfare" "which sees scientific enterprise as a complicated struggle for rational knowledge in which it is crucial to distinguish epistemic (for example scientific models) from non epistemic (for example fictions, falsities, propaganda) weapons" (Magnani, 2013: 56).



art to revise as models (See the section 2.2.2 and subsections relating to my own projects, *Exta*, *CHEMHEX EXTRACT*, and *Vaporents* ). To do so I will refer further to Eshun's own practice of "concept engineering" as well as methodological resonances between the work of Laruelle and anthropologist Martin Holbraad. Moreover, in the final chapter of this thesis I share my own practical modelisation through art projects, with regards to the 'swamp' as a fertile conceptual model.

Based on all of this, I conclude that on one hand the multitude of other 'turns' taking place across the humanities and sciences<sup>42</sup> similarly embody a turn motivated by a single core methodological emphasis, such as the emphasis on socially-constructed meaning of the cultural turn or the pre-individual and pre-conscious bodily forces that constitute social interaction of the affective turn. Such emphases are taken to be the result of perceived deficit of attention towards a more vital perspective. These turns have also witnessed an uptake across multiple disciplines and delivered complex discursive terrains (or "space of reasons" to use the Sellarsian phrase from Negarestani's quote above). On the other hand, while the speculative turn might also be said to operate according to the core abductive logic of speculation, by heresy raised to the status of methodological principle (a kind of "axiomatic heresy" (Brassier, 2003)), it is a turn that sets in the sharpest possible relief the *heuristic* logic of these turns' aims to think their subjects, fields, end environments anew. Rather than the mere provision of a model, it also constitutes a "model-ist explosion." While other turns proceed according to a set of fixed coordinates, for the speculative turn these coordinates are multiplied across a *long tail* of fecund subfields. Furthermore, I contend that the speculative turn, and its long tail, is *ordinary* (whereas many more turns have struggled to venture beyond academia, if not cloistered academic communities). The popular response to certain political, technological, and climatological complexities has instilled a much broader inclination towards altering the Overton window and thus the manner

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<sup>42</sup> Sociologist Mark Carrigan notes 47 different 'turns' (Carrigan, 2014: n.p.).

in which common resources are used and even how a common future ought to look from different, yet equally concerned, perspectives.

Joey Holder's iterative and distributed project *Adcredo: The Deep Belief Network* (2018) captures and explores this eco-epistemic warfare particularly well. I will refer to this project in more detail below, but for the current train of thought it provides a dynamic image for an epistemic long tail that combines and *superposes* esoteric knowledge, political populism, predictive algorithmic manipulation, fiction, future narratives, conspiracy theory, dystopian commercial artificial intelligence projects, and meme economies. With one aspect of the work consisting of a variety of CGI talking heads ranging from a serpentine Kanye West, the distorted self-image of Donald Trump (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) and Pepe the Frog,<sup>43</sup> with each avatar representing such different worldviews, conceptual schemes, and ways of thinking that they might each seem to belong to entirely different worlds (this idea is exacerbated in the use of alien figures as some of the talking heads - as they discuss ideas such as synchromysticism and Bilderberg Group saurian patrilineages, or even just an alternative political perspective, they render themselves 'alien' to what one might see as the familiar discourse of their Overton window.<sup>44</sup> And, such worldviews, according to the research of Citarella and my own invocation of marginal or para-academic spaces, have taken to percolating out of mainstream sight). This allows one to conclude that, in addition to my above argument, the long tail of the speculative turn also acts as a curative explosion of what is perceived to be epistemicide. From the perspective of different "campfires," to use one of Limberg's key phrases, different orthodoxies are assumed to be dominant. Take for example the imposition of the term "cathedral" as a model for a right-libertarian view of what they take to be a dominant aggregate of liberal media, education, and institutions. While a left-wing variant of such a view would take a right-motivated neoliberalism at work in the domination of contemporary life.

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<sup>43</sup> Pepe the Frog is a comic strip character first produced by Matt Furie in a comic called *Boy's Club*. Since being shared online as a meme-image representing various moods, the image has become synonymous as a symbol of alt-right coding.

<sup>44</sup> *Adcredo's* exhibition guide from its iteration at QUAD Gallery, Derby (2018) notes that "we live in a time of 'hyperpolarisation' where we think that people with different political or religious beliefs live in different worlds."

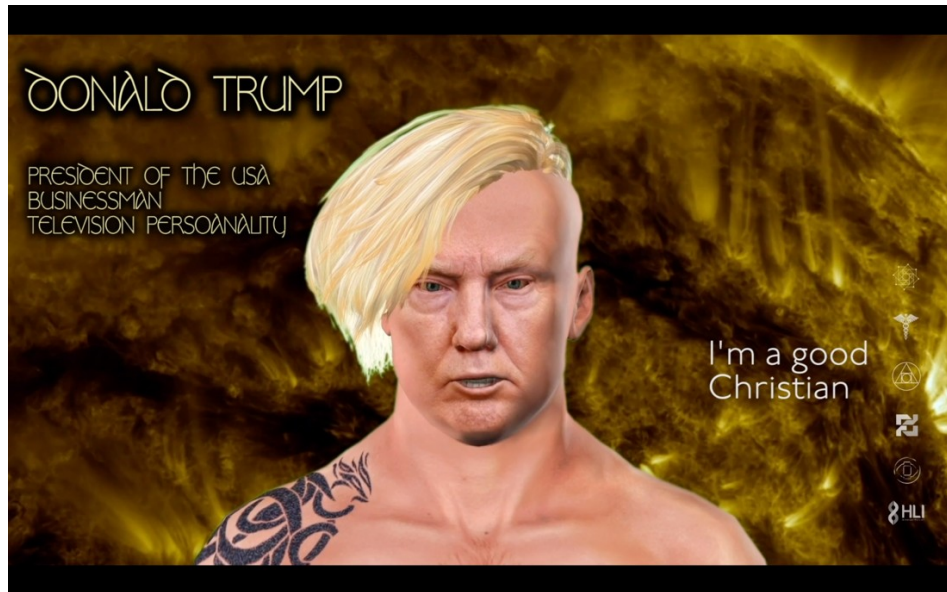


Figure 2.  
Holder, J, 2018, *Adcredo: The Deep Belief Network* (still).



Figure 3.  
Screenshot from @realDonaldTrump Twitter account, image, viewed 27  
November 2019  
< <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1199718185865535490?lang=en> >

### 1.3 Socio-Cognitive Technologies of the Speculative Turn

Beyond such illustration however, contemporary art fosters its own practical and theoretical shifts by which it affords particular opportunities and functions in terms of contributing to the broad, multi-modal discursive space of the speculative turn. It is uniquely positioned within (the formation of) a speculative *cognitive ecology*: contemporary art offers distinct resources in what Andrew Clark refers to as our propensity to materially “dissipate reasoning” and to “use intelligence to structure our environment so that we can succeed with less intelligence” (Clark, 1997: 180). Following the implications surrounding Clark’s and David Chalmers’ (heretical) articulation of the *extended mind hypothesis* (Clark & Chalmers, 1998), this thesis offers a review of how the speculative turn has emerged in and through the field of contemporary art. Work surrounding extended mind and extended cognition hypotheses provides opportunities to consider contemporary art as a dynamic process of *cognitive scaffolding* - contemporary art is uniquely placed among the wealth of artefacts where thinking is seen to reside *beyond the brain* (or, “beyond the skin” when we consider that neural activity is certainly affected by a variety of non-brain based fluctuations throughout the body). While much of material culture, in the scheme of ExC, might serve to embody, preserve and augment the abstract concepts that structure our experience of the world, the contemporary art of the speculative turn would be a form of *artefactual intelligence* concerned with (re)making the concepts with which we find some “ingress to the real” (Brassier).

The argument could be put forth that the diverse work of contemporary art is a distributed form of “eco-cognitive engineer[ing]” (Magnani, 2013: 50),

whereby artworks constitute stigmergic environmental modifications (in terms of being artefacts that circulate and forge varying degrees of influence within the cognitive ecology described here and in *Adcredo*) that share information across time and space.

But I would like to go a step further in order to focus on the properties of contemporary art examples, as “socio-cognitive technologies” (Pedersen, 2007: 154), that augment extant processes of cognition in such a way as to contribute to the formation of new terms, new concepts, and new ways of thinking. This means distinguishing how different contemporary artworks operate as “part of the material environment in which an ever-expanding array of human cognitive and epistemic activities unfold” (Smart, Heersmink, and Clowes, 2017: 253). Do they contribute to an existing paradigm by embodying and signal-boosting its core values and assumptions (see for example footnote 98)? Or do they revise such concepts, and *extrapolate* from these new terms *a counterfactual space of alternatives*?

Smart, Heersmink, and Clowes argue that it is a mundane certainty that we are each “actively involved in the construction of and configuration of a bio-external nexus of material resources that helps to influence the course of our cognitive processing and define the limits of our cognitive capabilities” (275). While cognitive psychologist Merlin Donald suggests that art has been generally “aimed at the deliberate refinement and elaboration of mental models and worldviews,” and has historically been engaged in altering “the prevailing images and worldviews of their societies in a highly selective manner,” towards an intervention in “cultural-cognitive governance” (Donald, 2006: 5-6). Although the discourses to which these assertions belong may furnish this thesis with the tools to examine how the speculative turn practically manifests in and through contemporary art, these comments are also indicative of a residual adherence to a correlationism, even a classical humanism, albeit in a modified form that has worked towards eliminating the line that divides nature and culture; things and people. This version of “humanism and its elevation of

the status of things by association to humans” (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 203), renders ExC analogous with Latour’s description of a “hybrid assemblage of humans and non-humans in mutual transformation” (206; Latour, 1999: 180). In Latour’s schema, as well as Donald along with Smart et al., although the ontological division between person and thing (biologically-based cognitive system and external material resource) is bridged, there is still an ontological determination used to conceptualise and render meaningful the thing-in-itself, and the dynamic hybrid of thing-person (whether this is collectives, assemblages, or the Actor Network) (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 210). And furthermore, in terms of cognitive processing, there is a latent assumption to be found in Donald and in Smart et al. that determines a common coding of information across this ontological divide. In order to unbind ExC’s latent correlationism I turn to Laruelle<sup>45</sup> along with the lesser known anthropological project, *thinking through things* (TTT) (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastel, 2007; Holbraad, 2011; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017).

To this end, while introducing the *Speculative Solution* work by artist Florian Hecker (which was distributed across audio, object, and textual artefacts that each variously expanded, explored, and illustrated Hecker’s concerns), Mackay reflects on the

“objects or situations that occasion or facilitate a certain meditation at a given historical juncture operate a selective pressure on thought: Certain turns in thinking can only take place in the company of certain objects, which thereby become instruments of philosophy, and the worldly indices of transformations in the conception of reason itself, the ‘image of thought.’” (Mackay, 2011: 3)

Although a highly instructive formulation, Mackay’s suggestion that such objects simply “become instruments of philosophy” can also be tempered by a

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<sup>45</sup> With Laruelle it is possible to explore the possibility of ExC’s ‘extension’ by working in the manner of his ‘unilateral duality,’ that cognition is extended not *from* a biologically-based cognitive system, but *back* to it (and, thus, following both Mackay (2011) and Viveiros de Castro (2014), results in this systems’s fundamental *transformation*). This might also be considered in terms of TTT’s logic of considering the “thing-as-heauristic” in order for it to engender its own theory and conceptual schema (Henare, Holbraad, Wastel, 2007: 5).

Laruelian inflection that proposes the very same objects as instruments of a kind of thinking that is not beholden to the *authority* of philosophy. This alternative phrasing would be an articulation of Laruelle's "cognition of the third kind."<sup>46</sup> Laruelle's non-philosophy here chimes well with the supposition that "external resources need not replicate internal resources; instead they can have different properties, functions and formats to those of the biologically-based cognitive system" (Smart, Heersmink, and Clowes, 2017: 269). Which is to acknowledge the *sui generis* materiality of external resources, such as an art project or a typewriter or a smartphone, as functionally different from biologically native apparatuses. And, according to TTT, ontologically different, with "conceptual affordances" (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 217) distinctly indifferent to our own theoretical criteria, or indeed, system of philosophy.<sup>47</sup> In the following chapter I elaborate upon TTT, along with its resonances with Laruelle, in terms of substantiating the axiomatic heresy of the speculative turn. That is, how concepts are re-thought and created, resulting in unorthodox "transformations in the conception of reason itself, the 'image of thought.'" Cognition as a synthetic and manipulable edifice.<sup>48</sup>

A significant model for much of my thinking thus far, particularly the way in which it aims to be speculatively constructive, is that of "cognitive scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976; Day 2004; Caporael, Griesemer, and Wimsatt, 2013). The term is emblematic of a heuristic logic found in many of this chapter's subjects be they Meillassoux's archer-fossil, Brassier's

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<sup>46</sup> "The Real is rather like Kant's 'thing-in-itself: unknowable and even unthinkable, but with this difference: it is constituted by a foreclosed immanence rather than by transcendence (it is the One rather than the Other), and consists in an experience or cognition of the third kind; the vision-in-One" (Laruelle, 2013: 271)

<sup>47</sup> For philosophy in this scheme is constitutively correlationist in that (using Brassier's definition of correlationism again) it designates "some transcendental operator – such as life or consciousness or *Dasein* – generating the conditions of manifestation through which phenomena manifest themselves" rather than immanently fostered criteria.

<sup>48</sup> "it must no longer designate the deviant quality of a scientific theory or a religious interpretation, the errancy and unorthodoxy of a doctrine - it must no longer be a critical or insulting attribute, *instead being elaborated and treated as a consistent, autonomous manner of thinking possessing an internal essence that can be ascribed to nothing else*" (Laruelle, 2012: 268).

scientific data, Laruelle and TTT's treatment of things (again, 'things' in a broad sense), conceptual models, and, as I suggest, artworks as socio-cognitive technologies, that do not simply "off-load some of the heavy computational cargo into the surrounding environment" (Day, 2004: 107) but also create a space for thought populated by an ecology of emergent terms and provisional concepts; speculations. The cognitive scaffold then is a space for assembly and production according to certain structural parameters (scaffolding is "external" and "temporary" (Caporael, Griesemer, and Wimsatt, 2013: 1)) presented to "overcome some of the brain's native cognitive limitations and conquer new territories in the Space of Reason" (Day, 2004: 112). While TTT's things produce their own terms for engagement via their native ontologies Laruelle's subjects immanently re-configure thought and theory, the contemporary artwork has the opportunity to be thought of as an "ontology machine" (Beech, 2018: 5).

It is tempting to foreground a contemporary art exhibition such as *The Extended Mind*, which as a collaborative effort between University of Edinburgh's Talbot Rice Gallery and The History of Distributed Cognition Project, rigorously explores the facets and roles of embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition, along with their social dimensions. It is thus a more effective *overview* of the discourses which foster the arguments that develop ExC than this thesis is, and a significant resource for how artworks have and can be thought of through such terms. Firstly however, while I am contributing to the development of ExC as a theory, it is not the primary concern - it is a methodological resource that, like those considered already, gain their significance for this thesis in their novel combination and practical implementation (in the building of actual and "theoretical installations"). With ExC I am able to discuss in practical terms the evolution of the speculative turn in and through contemporary art, particularly with regards to the comparatively overlooked rational variants of SR. And with the resources of ExC it is possible to characterise the context for contemporary art's activities in terms of a cognitive ecology. Secondly, as with the aforementioned 'biennialisation' of



SR, it is of no interest to merely take these fields as another theme for contemporary art.<sup>49</sup> Instead, it is the general commitment of this thesis to explore how such ideas, and their inferences, are taken up in practice, and also, crucially, to explore them with my own curatorial practice. This shows how contemporary art can contribute to the development of such theories rather than being called upon to *illustrate* them.

Again, this will be laid out and worked through in more detail in Chapter 3, but it will be useful for now to look again at Holder's *Adcredo*. As much as *dOCUMENTA (13)*'s exhibition, "The Brain," referred to a space where connections might be made between disparate objects and novel research was promoted, *Adcredo* elicits this through the project's narrative in a more tacit manner. And, that this kind of thinking is happening *without* our presence. My reasoning for this lies in Holder's articulation of the project within a narrative which posits *Adcredo* as the name of a "fictional data-analysis company" (Holder, 2018). This company was represented by a website, as well as inhabiting a vestibule area in the QUAD Gallery iteration of this project. These spaces were presented as typically corporate in nature, identifying company history, values, and, its core aim: "We help organisations or bodies implant their ideologies in communities around the world, both on and offline" (Holder, 2018). With this information along with the articulation of a "Deep Belief Network," one can assume such predictive processes favoured by the company as those developed by companies such as DeepMind, working with highly advanced Generative Adversarial Networks and Artificial Intelligence. The *Adcredo* corporate 'entrance' was vastly different from the main gallery space which house Holder's films: the latter consisting of two advertising screens mounted on rockfaces, surrounding walls and floors covered in vinyl depicting "a hellish, nightmare landscape" of churning lava and storms, and

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<sup>49</sup> Such a move would be to mirror that of philosophy's 'principle of sufficient philosophy,' which grants philosophy an overview of all other subjects for it to take into its pre-determined discursive norms; it the "philosophical decision" that dialectically extricates philosophy from the world in order to grasp it (Laruelle, 2013:56).

dark, red lighting (Fig. 4).<sup>50</sup> This space calls to mind the other Google project Deep Dream, which ‘hallucinates,’ or rather extrapolates what it thinks certain forms look like based on a learned dataset. Holder’s nightmare landscape then might be her presentation of what is thrown up by Adcredo’s Deep Belief Network after ingesting the long tail of political opinion brewing through social networks, or even her presentation of the Deep Belief Network’s infrastructural black box operations. A synthetic mode of cognition in action; the mythic visualisation of imperceptible processes.



Figure 4.  
Holder, J, 2018, *Adcredo: The Deep Belief Network* (installation view), QUADGallery, Derby.

So what kind of thinking might we discover in this edifice? If this space constitutes an alternative ontological order that belongs to the Deep Belief Network then how does it work as a scaffold for us? What terms does it offer for an “ontological revisionism” when thought of as a heuristic (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 202)?

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<sup>50</sup> Such different worlds are presented that they call to mind Holder’s invocation of ‘hyper polarisation’ (see footnote 44) but also the alternative ontological order of things proposed by TTT.

Of course, *Adcredo* brings to mind some relatively mundane ideas, for example the fact that communications networks extract data from users in order to “give rise to new narratives” through proprietary algorithms that determine how information is shared therein (Holder, 2018). And such ideas are certainly educational in that they employ us to think more critically about the technologies we use: how they are situated within a network of actors. But of greater interest here is how, in the film elements of *Adcredo*, Holder embodies a form of thinking in the combination and *superposition* of esoteric knowledges, political ideologies, conspiracy theories, occult symbolism, internet memes, Ted Talk think-pieces, mythology, celebrity rants, alchemy, and modern scientific postulation. Holder here excavates materials from the long tail of an online cognitive ecology, where information, opinion, fiction, and ideas can often find unregulated spaces to circulate and cohere into narratives. The vast heterogeneity of *Adcredo*’s long tail worldviews is emblematic of the very definition of cognitive ecologies as the “*multidimensional* contexts in which we remember, feel, think, sense, communicate, imagine, act, often collaboratively, on the fly, and in rich ongoing interaction with our environments” (Tribble and Sutton, 2011: 94, emphasis added).

In presenting us with the materials of this epistemic long tail in their state of “hyperpolisation,” *Adcredo* conjures a world of *multiple and simultaneous realities* (this is a phrase of my own that I find highly relevant for discussing this work and also the particularities of contemporary cognitive ecologies; it is a phrase I have used in motivating my own *Most Dismal Swamp* (MDS) projects (see combined chapter 3 and relevant portfolio material). This is a world where Donald Trump can see himself as a strong, muscular hero leading his tribe’s fight against a perceived threat to Western values and Christianity (Holder, 2018). Yet this world also houses the image of Vladimir Putin as a similarly heroic and swashbuckling figure defending Russia’s unique “cultural-logical” philosophy (Holder, 2018). And when one sees the familiar

face of Kanye West distorted by serpentine features, discussing the malleability of symbols' meanings such as the swastika in front of an animated background of occult motifs (Fig. 5), he seems to merge with the perceptions of those who foster conspiracies regarding lizard-cabals of ruling classes.



Figure 5.  
Holder, J, 2018, *Adcredo: The Deep Belief Network* (still).

The kind of thinking enacted in these sequences is that of a kind of “speculative association” (Holder, 2018) that is visualised here not as a dialectic logic but rather as a conjunctive logic of *superposition* where associations are simultaneous with one another. Rather than exhibiting the “unity of opposites” (Laruelle, 2012: 239) that the individuation of classical logic depends on (from Kanye West to Reptile to Conspiracy Narrative to Donald Trump to Hero), the mutational conjugation and *entanglement* of forms present in *Adcredo* (Kanye West-and-Reptile-and-Conspiracy Theory-and-Donald Trump-and-Hero) proposes a way of viewing and thinking about this mediascape (the cognitive ecology from which Holder draws) as multiple and simultaneous. This is opposed to the debilitating mode of “hyperpolarisation” that contributes to seeing the views of others as alien, or even not registering them at all when our gaze is firmly situated within “social media echo chambers” (Holder, 2018).

This kind of thinking, and the “ontological revisionism” that it might offer, is explored using my own speculative model, which is implemented in the curatorial projects of MDS. With MDS as a whole I have proposed to consider the kind of cognitive ecology presented in *Adcredo* as a *swampscape*, with which I experiment and develop ways of thinking about the *multiple and simultaneous* forms therein. As such, I describe projects with especially novel curatorial methods that make use of CGI, film, 3D compositing, special effects, and ways in which such works might be entangled.

In the project *Swamp Protocol* I explore, with various artists, some of the emergent rituals and tacit procedures necessary for navigating the shared space of the swampscape. And in *Whale Fall*, a speculative bestiary of avatars, persons, data-shadows, hybrids, and tulpas visualise a long tail of post-digital bodies and how they challenge orthodox conceptions of personhood, intelligence, corporeality, and life. Throughout MDS I gather such resources, in order to ask: is there a collective rationality emerging from the digitally altered states wrought by the swampscape? Some kind of *Dank Enlightenment*?

## 1.4 A Long Tail of Enlightenments

These latter questions are aimed at drawing together any “new terms,” revised concepts, heresies, alien theories, or any other speculations that are thrown up by the contemporary art (including my own projects) that this thesis engages with, towards the formation of some system of progressive thought; towards an Enlightenment programme that corresponds with and is renewed by current cognitive ecologies; that corresponds with TTT’s “plurality of ontologies” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastel, 2007: 7). My speculative gambit to test here is that there is a long tail of Enlightenments, coalescing around and exploding forth from its core disenchantment of the world through the sciences

as a “speculative opportunity.” Which is thus an opportunity to renew our “image of thought.”<sup>51</sup>

In discussing how the findings of contemporary neuroscience (such as those that have motivated the speculative work of Brassier) have not only contributed to such a disenchantment of the world, but also a disenchantment of ourselves (that is, disregard of evolutionary atavisms such as the ‘self’ which impede progress that follows scientific discovery), Thomas Metzinger has used the term “Enlightenment 2.0” (Metzinger, 2009: 211). This neuroscientifically-inflected Enlightenment, he suggests, “will tell us more about what the conditions of possibility for knowledge are” (Ibid.). These possibilities for knowledge are only tangible as a result of gathering, fostering, and implementing the suite of concepts that the neuroscience communities aim to provide for and eliminate from a public lexicon.

Enlightenment 2.0 might indeed be one such sub-system operating across the Enlightenment’s long tail. My own experimental neologism (this thesis proposes that it is *necessary* for it to devise and test speculative models and concepts according to the logics I am discussing: there is a functionally speculative aspect to the thesis project that matches the challenges made to *practice* speculation rather than to treat it as a theme), the Dank Enlightenment, is a ludic exploration of what another such sub-system may look like. It is proposed as one facet among a speculative field of uneven and combined heresy. While Enlightenment 2.0 may be a name for the result of the incursions wrought by the natural sciences, the Dank Enlightenment may be a name for the “new” and “strange” science of a renewed *mystics* (see section 2.3). Note that it is not a prescription for contemporary art, and the speculative turn in general, but my own heuristic device and is native to the work and world of MDS.

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<sup>51</sup> Brassier’s work charges philosophy to “draw out the ultimate speculative implications of Enlightenment” by “expediting science’s demolition of the manifest image.” To be clear, Brassier goes on to argue for a *revision* of the manifest image according to the anomalies thrown up by the scientific image (Brassier, 2007: 231).

Donna Haraway has famously dreamed “not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (Haraway, 2001: 316). This notion of a common language is for Haraway “totalizing and imperialist” which accords with a general postmodern allergy towards grand narratives, and a way of thinking that has materialised in art through a preference for the open-ended “catalytic art” (Chin, 2001: 133) of the social turn and of the “interpretive paradigm,” and a corresponding “fear of making meaning” (Beech, Canini, Fisher, Grant, and Mackay, 2010: n.p.). However, in following the logic of the proposal that we might trace a long tail of Enlightenments composed of sub-systems following an axiomatic heresy, then Haraway’s statement must be reformulated, in the conjunctive manner specified above, as *a common language-and-infidel heteroglossia*; a rational schematisation of and with the immanent conceptual expressions of speculation; a realisation of Beech’s aforementioned “construction of another language.” For this is to substantiate Whitehead’s definition of speculation in the sense that it is not only a “flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization” but also “lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.” With such speculations as the Dank Enlightenment for example, I can render a glossary of new and revised terms through the swampscape model and with the entanglement of various artworks towards the articulation and renewal of what Clark calls “public language,” the “magic words” and external artefacts that augment human cognition (Clark, 1998; see also Wheeler, 2007 and Culpitt, 1998: 120 on the mystic “use” of language).

## 2. Tracing a Speculative Schism

In this chapter, the 'speculative turn,' in relation to contemporary art, is traced as a schism with what the curator and critic Lars Bang Larsen has termed 'the long nineties' (Larsen, 2012). I thus build on Larsen's foundational use of the phrase, towards a coherent understanding of what it signifies more broadly as a pervasive and deeply entrenched *orthodoxy* in terms of the concepts, models, practices, ideologies and discourses it crystallises and promotes. Although the term itself has not found widespread purchase within art's discourses, this chapter will make the case for its necessary inclusion within a critical vocabulary attuned to grasping and elaborating the conditions for the emergence of the speculative turn, as well as the crucial motivations that guide its emergence.

The arbitrary bracketing of a single decade, along with the artists, fashions, theories and concerns with which history or memory has deemed it synonymous, is of course not a sufficient reason for shifting the collective focus of contemporary art. Discourses and hype cycles undoubtedly flourish, resolve, splinter and perish at different paces, without paying attention to reductive and vague categories such as 'the nineties'. There was no Y2K bug that short-circuited contemporary arts discourse. Nor had the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020 witnessed the live-streamed unboxing of new artists and trends to work with over the following decade in order to insulate this period from the #long2010s.<sup>52</sup>

But, I do argue that such a sudden ascension in the hype cycle of 'speculation' in the markets and social networks of contemporary art (as well as many other fields) is indeed contextually-motivated. Which is to say that the work of the speculative turn broadly perceives and responds to a set of combined concerns and demands that accompany a context that has been

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<sup>52</sup> "Unlike Cinderella, methods of making and thinking about art don't become unwelcome at the ball just because the clock strikes midnight." (Morton, 2005: n.p.)



increasingly described as the Anthropocene, the New Normal, and the Posthuman Nexus among many other speculative designations. And such a context is, conversely, fundamentally inhospitable to the relevance of the cultural and methodological orthodoxies that the long nineties represent. For the ways of viewing the world as named in this brief list each allude to a manner of thinking that acknowledges an objective and indifferent *reality* that exists independently of our subjective perception of it (such a conceit is pursued and unpacked in various ways by the galvanising work of SR).

Consequently, I will thus develop the idea that the speculative turn is a particular kind of discursive shift in cognitive orientation (Seibt, 2015). That is, as an active, imaginative form of *thinking* and *theorising* beyond orthodoxy; beyond the “cultural confinement” (Smithson, quoted in Vishmidt, 2014: 253) of an established Overton window, and beyond a matrix of possibility.<sup>53</sup> Philosopher Eugene Thacker has described this as thinking “beyond thought” (Thacker, 2011: 190), which accounts for such commitments as already discussed as abductive reason. What this means for the present chapter is the adoption of a socio-cognitive register with which to evaluate and discuss the work of the long nineties and the speculative turn, which has heretofore been uncommon in contemporary art discourses and art theory. Especially, in those reflecting on the significance of contemporary art’s recent explicitly speculative rhetoric, which should be taken as surprising given the definitively cognitive impulse of speculation. Regarding *how* this shift is implemented and instantiated by the speculative turn, I will explore this in further detail in the second half of this chapter.

I will thus focus on the kinds of concepts, images and mental models circulating within and generated by the long nineties, as well as the distinct ‘space of reasons’ it has cultivated. What kind of thinking (what type,

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<sup>53</sup> Smithson’s full statement, for reference later in this chapter: “Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into *fraudulent categories*” (Smithson, 1996: 154, emphasis added).

limitations and opportunities) is enabled among the “communities of mind” (Donald, 2006: 3) of the long nineties? If we follow the implications of SR and its related discourses, what might we say *constitutes* such communities of mind (is our definitions of ‘community’ and ‘sociality’ revised somewhat)? What kind of cognitive apparatus or *scaffolding* for fostering enquiry and navigation is constructible from the materials that constitute the long nineties? Which norms are produced in this space of reasons? With such questions we can pick up and explore the issues posed by Amanda Beech in her provocative, even heretical, work regarding ‘how art thinks’ (Beech et al., 2015-16; Beech, 2018). What is the role of contemporary art in the act of speculating?

This turn, then, similarly marks a point of active reformulation; a point of socio-cognitive re-orientation provoked by a) accelerating technological advancement, financial risk and ecological crisis, and b) the various popular narratives through which these phenomena find purchase on broader public perception. These factors have prompted questions and speculations across news media, film, music, fashion, science, academia and indeed contemporary art that are consequently *elemental* in their explorations and queries. From deeply embedded economic and political systems along with their long-standing institutions, to traditional systems of gender identification and sexual orientation; to re-thinking the very category of the human. Such a ‘socio-cognitive re-orientation’ is not so much defined by a hermeneutics of suspicion (nor indeed, a hermeneutics of faith) but rather a speculative impulse that looks towards generating and experimenting with new possibilities outside the Overton<sup>54</sup> window.<sup>55</sup> Which is to say that a core concern here is the differences in the supposedly *subtractive* work of critique and the comparatively *additive* work of speculation, or, more specifically, the *navigational* work of *speculative reason* (Whitehead, 1979).

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<sup>54</sup> And thus reconfiguring the parameters of public discourse.

<sup>55</sup> Nor is this cultural reconsideration defined by consistency or consensus: as Eshun suggests of an epistemic long tail that “operate[s] by disagreements and differentiations, that make[s] claims that must be argued” (Eshun, 2017).

I argue that speculative reason, when embodied and developed through the work of the speculative turn, is a socio-cognitive mechanism that allows for the parsing, navigating and exploration of a particular context(s), as noted above. Following Whitehead's definition of speculative reason as a process which discursively elaborates a form of thought augmented by "a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization... [which then] lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation," we can elaborate such a mechanism as that which operates differently from critique. I will explore how speculation, as it is implemented in the speculative turn, can be better defined and explicated through the model of heresy (already the rhetoric of this thesis is composed of language and concepts such as un/orthodoxy). Therefore, while I locate certain well-worn 'orthodoxies' in the mannerisms of the long nineties, I will clarify how they enter into a speculative *transvaluation* that is more attuned to the practice of heresy than it is to critique. Such orthodoxies are also deeply embedded, to the point of achieving a status of commonsense folk logic; as gospel to be intuitively distributed, reproduced and sanctified throughout the markets, institutions and social networks of contemporary art. This includes not only the naturalisation of *critique* (Beech, 2018),<sup>56</sup> but also the *liberal subject* as the foremost rational political actor of modernity (and the subject positions this assumes for 'artist' and 'audience'), the investment in *subjective 'lived' experience* as the measure of reality, and, the unquestioned polestar around which each of these circle: *Humanist anthropocentrism*.

Furthermore, this chapter also acknowledges that any given period is of course much more diverse in terms of discourse and artistic production than any single 'turn' may name. Different histories are visible from different perspectives, and the nineties was a period that also incubated many key ideas and practices pertinent to constructing a genealogy of the speculative turn. Although the latter task is not the primary concern of this chapter, it is essential not to disembody the speculative turn from its own history and to erase the

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<sup>56</sup> As well as its mannerist variant, "criticality" (Rogoff, 2003).

foundational work for what otherwise appears *ex nihilo* (Braidotti and Vermeulen, 2014).

Framing the nexus of practices, artists, artworks, discourses, memes, models and concepts that constitute the long nineties in this way is not simply to create a dualistic foil through which the speculative turn is directly opposed (hence my turn to heresy as a model). Rather, I argue that ‘the long nineties’ is a useful, descriptive and diagnostic category and thus treat the materials it represents non-reductively in seeking out positive and negative resources for deeper engagement. So, the *orthodoxies* and *mannerisms* which define the long nineties provide this chapter with the resources to elaborate an *axiom of heresy* by which the work of the speculative turn can be better understood: From what and how does the speculative turn, turn? This is to say that the fundamental vocabulary of concepts and models embodied by the long nineties are limiting and inadequate tools for navigating the cultural, scientific, ecological, infrastructural and cosmic realities from which the work of the speculative turn emerges and is concerned with exploring.

On one hand, invoking the specific dynamics of heresy as a model highlights the revision of establishment *doxa* which I argue is a defining principle of the speculative turn. On the other hand, it allows this chapter to name and focus upon specific *functional* characteristics of the long nineties and the substantive transvaluations initiated in the work of the speculative turn. In other words, this chapter, in outlining both the long nineties and the speculative turn as distinct networks of objects, methods, images, texts, concepts, subjects and models, asks: what is it that they *do* that is fundamentally different from one another? *Towards* what does the speculative turn, turn?

While there is a broad agreement regarding what ‘the long sixties’ denotes, from the political revolutions initiated in the rise of movements dedicated to civil rights and feminism to the counter-cultural revolutions that emerged through experimental drug use (Strain, 2016), others have also adapted the

term to suit their historical commentaries on a long seventies (Tierney, 2019) and a long eighties (Saval, 2013). These latter adaptations highlight the flexibility of the notion of a ‘long’ decade in terms of what is at stake in their histories: it is somewhat of a journalistic and academic trope that generally situates the activities of a particular decade in a wider context in order to explore their past roots and their future impact. With the short article published in Frieze magazine, *The Long Nineties* (Larsen, 2012), a name is given to the formal tropes, discursive rhetoric and ideological commitments of art’s ‘social turn’ that, crucially, “remain unsubverted.”

Larsen’s title cites a 2005 review, also published in Frieze, in which the 8<sup>th</sup> Lyon Biennial is described in positive terms as “an art-historical argument for a ‘long 1990s’” (Morton, 2005). While this review makes the legitimate point that “methods of making and thinking about art don’t become unwelcome” by virtue of a mere change in decade, Larsen’s article, published seven years later, articulates a weary frustration with ‘methods of making and thinking about art’ that persist despite what he outlines as their complicity with “the ‘governmentality’ of our time” (Larsen).

So, like the lasting significance of the sixties’ social-cultural revolutions, Tom Morton, in the earlier Frieze article, intends to highlight a positive legacy emerging from the social turn’s own radical shifts that is present not only in seminal works of the nineties but in the continued articulation and development of these “other time-streams, other histories” in significantly visible and historicising events such as the 8<sup>th</sup> Lyon Biennial (Morton). Morton thus reminds us that although many may now look back upon the nineties and see a period dominated by the emergence of the social turn (its artworks, discourse, images, ideologues, tropes, methods, texts, precursors), it was indeed at variance with what *it* perceived as traditional, or, orthodox. The ‘other history’ of the social turn marks the development of an antidote to, or at least a struggle against, numerous customary presumptions that had been refined throughout modernism and into the supposed decadence of the eighties:

“No longer something remote, academic and monumental, art became a situation or a process. A work was now a club, a bar, a meal, a cinema, a hang-out, a dance floor, a game of football or a piece of furniture... The sole author and the contemplative beholder were atomized in works that called for togetherness, and were often created by collectives or self-organized entities. The art institution started to reflect on itself as a critical space, and exhibition formats opened up in turn. Art took place anywhere – in front of a video camera, on an answering machine, in the urban space. Everyday life became meaningful again, even a refuge from late capitalism” (Larsen).

Larsen’s summary pits the work of the social turn against a nexus of modern mannerisms. Here, it turns decisively *away* from the high-value and easily-marketable forms such as painting and sculpture, the parenthetical non-space and purity of the white cube, the lauded genius and his signature that proclaims auteurship, the passive role of the audience or the viewer, the hierarchy of low-high culture (or indeed the idea that culture is anything but ordinary (Williams)). It involved fundamental shifts in the formal vocabulary, ideological commitments, and methods of production, display and consumption. (For *key* texts charting, contextualising and explicating these shifts in such a way as to reflect them with a renewed and situated theory that would claim to not “take shelter behind Sixties art history” (Bourriaud, 2002: 7), but rather “to generate a more nuanced (and honest) critical vocabulary with which to address the vicissitudes of collaborative authorship and spectatorship” (Bishop, 2012: 8) see Bishop, 2006; Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud, 2002; Kester, 2004; Larsen, 1999).

While this thesis is not concerned with rehearsing or addressing the arguments for the successes or failures in the social turn’s aims as listed above, I will briefly review Larsen’s critique in *The Long Nineties*. For the intention here is to explain what Larsen means in his use of ‘the long nineties,’ before elaborating my own application of the phrase regarding the context and prevalent orthodoxies from which the speculative turn in contemporary art has emerged.

Therefore I will focus not on the well-worn milieu synonymous with the emergence of the social turn of the nineties, but rather that of a later moment where this ‘other history’ might be better identified as little more than the emperor's new clothes; and as an indulgent *mannerism* that emerged from the new courts of the social turn.<sup>57</sup> But to conclude an analysis of ‘the long nineties’ here would be to deny its fully chronopolitical import. Accordingly, my analysis builds on Larsen’s problematisation of the centrality of ‘the social’ as “something fundamentally different at different historical times.” And from there, towards a socio-cognitive reading of the long nineties: with the materials aggregated in the work of the social turn (including the critical vocabulary with which it is identified), what kind of concepts, mental models, modes of thinking and *epistemes* are then being inherited by and venerated through its perpetuation as the long nineties? I thus lead my examination of the long nineties towards a discussion on the role of contemporary art as a distributed instance of ExC. That it contributes to the epistemic navigation of the wider milieux and ecologies from which it emerges and is an active part of. In terms of assessing the work of the social turn along with what I am calling the speculative turn in contemporary art, this means considering how they engage with and render ‘reality,’ or what philosophy will often refer to as ‘the Real’. What then are the *manipulative* capacities of contemporary art as a distributed form of *situated knowledge* (Harraway, 1988); as a socio-cognitive *information processing protocol* part of a wider *cognitive ecology* (Bateson, 1972; Hutchins, 2010); as a portable *cognitive scaffold*?

## 2.1 The Long Nineties

### 2.1.1 ‘The Social Turn and its Discontents’

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<sup>57</sup> I have selected the term *mannerism* with reference to the developments in 16<sup>th</sup> century late-renaissance painting which saw an adjustment from realistic figurative depiction using set rules and innovations towards a more fanciful elongation of form that suggested a more decadent figuration. I use the term in the sense of a decadent stylisation, in the form of rhetoric and academic affectation, of critical work.

Larsen's checklist of issues concerning contemporary art's social turn easily provides kindling for a variety of critical perspectives on the topic, and can indeed be connected with the projects and theses of others in this vein. For instance, his lament for a loss of Adorno's "infinitely difficult" (Adorno quoted in Larsen) art can be associated with Bishop's project of transcending the formally relativising, ethically-motivated "shibboleths" of art-criticism which, to her, serves the erroneous assumption that participatory practices are *inherently* political and virtuous. Instead she situates work that circumvents the "incapacitating restrictions of guilt" (Bishop, 2006: 183) by artists such as Christoph Schlingensiefel, Santiago Sierra, Jeremy Deller, Carsten Höller, Phil Collins and Artur Zmijewski within a long tradition of neo-avant garde works; "part of an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively" (Bishop, 2012: 3). Likewise, Larsen's suggestion that "former keywords of artistic and social critique – conformism, alienation, negation – were likewise ejected from the vocabulary" of the social turn reflects Markus Miessen's concerns regarding the stasis of consensus that many participatory and relational projects arrived at, rather than his preference for ongoing "conflictual participation," or, following Chantale Mouffe, a more dynamic and productive "agonism" (Miessen, 2010: 92).

The argument most fully fleshed out in Larsen's short article, however, pertains to contemporary art's role in a "new economy... brimming with imperatives to socialize." Here Larsen covers some ground that was evident in the context of the UK through New Labour's Third Way rhetoric and its seizure of the socially-engaged art model (Hewitt, 2012; Mulholland, 2008). This puts forward a social function of art predicated upon art as a *service* for the "public good" (I will discuss some of the assumptions embedded in this position below):

"By embracing socially-engaged art practice, the state has funnelled it into supporting its agenda of education and community building as a 'public good'. This is Frayling's 'force for change', of the Arts Council's desire for 'civic pride' and building 'vibrant communities'. The function for art here is as a form of improvement for those without art in their lives". (Hewitt, 2012: 109)



Regarding the nineties, Larsen notes that “significant artistic positions of the decade have rarely been associated directly with power the way that the works of Jeff Koons, for instance, were read as unambiguous symptoms of Reaganism,” which suggests instead a more insidious association that demands a much closer focus. A *soft power* that manifests in and through the work of the social turn. Despite the fact the issue of recuperation has been acknowledged by even some of the social turn’s most enthusiastic exponents (Thompson, 2012: 32), the constitutive rhetoric of criticality, site/context-specificity, self-reflexivity, public accountability, and direct participatory public engagement of the social turn (that is, as criteria tuned and implemented in a manner consistent with a broader cultural *episteme* (see below) that socialised both art and power (Larsen)) ultimately consolidated a “homeostatic,” “palliative” function for contemporary art (Vishmidt, 2014: 260-3) as well as generic axiomatic conditions such as that of its “indeterminacy” (Malik, 2013).

Here, we can situate Larsen’s critical review of the social turn among those who have worked towards disentangling its widely accepted progressive rhetoric as a somewhat more ambiguous symptom of socialised or biopolitical modes of governance. Such work has tended towards a systemic or ‘macro’ perspective which draws attention to the *functional* attributes of artforms: contemporary art is not defined by what it formally *is*, or claims to *be* (as per Bishop’s project as a means to generate an appropriate system of aesthetic judgement (Bishop, 2012: 8)) but rather by what it *does*; by its *behaviour* and *impact* in a broader complex system of interacting social, technical, political, and ecological actants.

For instance, Marina Vishmidt explores the tendencies of “cultural deployments of criticality and participation [which] highlight the reciprocity between the normativity of dissent and the acceptability of control” (Vishmidt, 2014: 260). This is an analysis predicated on the recursivity of second-order cybernetics, deeming that ‘participation’ functions as a feedback technology which *optimizes* systemic function, rather than disrupts it: “control simply

cannot happen without participation” (254). The ‘system’ described by Vishmidt is that of the “structures of finance, legitimation and policy” (268); the “market mechanisms and state agendas” that exist as a “far a more porous and pervasive condition” (253). That is, Vishmidt considers the combined and simultaneous adoption of ‘participation’ in a pervasive cultural logic “as received wisdom, utopian hope and managerial technique” (254): the social turn is a paradoxical knotting together of the rhetoric of liberation and progress with the reflexive techniques of “cultural confinement.” Her argument primarily follows “the advent of participatory criticality over distanced critique” (259) - what this thesis refers to as the development of a *mannerism* of art’s social turn constitutive of the long nineties.<sup>58</sup>

Irit Rogoff’s concept of ‘criticality’ is Vishmidt’s primary target as a “form of critique” that is symptomatic of the conjuncture of socialised art and power. It is with the development of ‘criticality’ that Rogoff intends to circumvent complicity with positions of power:

For Rogoff, [critique and criticism] have proven inadequate because criticism assumes a position of constituted authority which can exert judgement, while critique does this plus requiring an inside/outside model which operates as what has elsewhere been called a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ in order to perform its stated objectives, i.e. reveal ideologies or challenge assumptions. ‘Criticality’, she contends, eschews the problematic make-up of these strategies in favour of an ethics of ‘occupation’ which does not seek ‘resolution’ so much as a ‘heightened awareness’ of the tactical and theoretical compass available to cultural practitioners... Rogoff is in fact proposing a form of critique which is contingent on inhabiting institutions and speaking from their places of power, a form of critique which is contingent on the maintenance of that power and on the persistence of solidarity of the powerful with each other. It thus naturalizes the institution in its present form as the only possible vehicle for critique, much as the market is ideologically anointed as the only social arrangement that provides (if not realizes) the possibility of emancipation. By dismissing critique because it presumes to judge rather than participate, the gesture of criticality becomes structurally affirmative, but, significantly, not ‘pre-critical’

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<sup>58</sup> Vishmidt opts to highlight the internal logical *contradictions* of the social turn in her invocation of its “institutionalization of critique”, as does Larsen in his recognition of ‘the social’ as “turn[ing] the screw of institutionalization.”

since it also has to assume the established value of critique as intellectual currency in the academy and related sites of cultural production”. (257-8)

For Vishmidt, then, participatory criticality and its pervasive cultural logic, functions in a palliative, even homeostatic manner that ‘naturalizes the institution.’ And this logic can be mapped on to key practices of the social turn whereby artworks and projects sought to occupy institutional platforms and circuits in order to generate *participatory* civic discourse enriched by engaging “‘communities’ and specific, targeted groups” beyond that of an elite or detached art world. Foremost in this regard is the idea of the “micro-utopia” put forth by Nicolas Bourriaud in his outlining of the art of the social turn as a ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud, 2002: 31). Such materialisations of this ‘cultural logic of criticality’ at once reflect, as Larsen notes, a commercial turn towards an “experience economy” (Gilmore and Pine, 1998) as well as provide “alibis for domination” (Vishmidt, 2014: 260). Micro-utopias, in this systemic formulation, provide a minimal registration of contained dissent: contained as discrete novel experiences with artists’ and curators’ inhabiting roles akin to that of ‘customer experience management.’ And in the many cases where such projects are motivated by the gathering of individuals in order to provide a space for dialogue, dissent, protest, or producing altogether new relational forms (Bourriaud, 2012: 16), these minor enclaves also function as “sanctioned subversion” (Vishmidt, 2014; 263): components *within a system* that provide a regulatory function and are thus “*structurally* affirmative” (emphasis added). In the case of the social turn’s explicitly participatory projects, that diverse participation takes place in this way provides a kind of civic bromide which at once keeps subversion at a safe remove from power and also allows those in power to gesture towards such projects as evidence of a democratic platforming of all voices. My question, to carry forward into the next section of this thesis which will focus on the *content* of such projects, is: what *kind* of experience is being managed/provided? What is the signal that such experiences carry for those experiencing them?

This view towards the language, procedures and pretensions of how participatory criticality (and even critique more broadly) manifests a ‘structurally affirmative’ protocol in contemporary art is also present in arguments put forth by many others. Among these are Martha Rosler’s review of the various categories of criticality that have emerged as motivating strands of ‘political art,’ such as that of “the better behaved forms such as the nicely bureaucratic-sounding ‘institutional critique’” and “the curatorial subgenre called “new institutionalism”” (Rosler, 2010: 122-3) (the latter Vishmidt also brings up as emblematic of a “limited ‘institutionalisation of critique’” (Vishmidt, 2010: 255). I agree by positioning this ‘subgenre’ as a mannerism of the long nineties). Rosler positions criticality, in general, as a mode of “new art academicism” whose rhetoric provides artists with the means to “teach art as a source of income to fund their production rather than to simply find markets” (119) and to appeal to the “art world core of cognoscenti who... favour art with a critical edge” (133). She contrasts this kind of performative criticality with that of a more *structurally* “successful” project (in terms of posing challenges to a “reigning paradigm”) such as Feminism, which actively sought to “rethink *what* and *who* an artist is and might be, what materials art might be made of, and what art *meant*... replacing this with far broader, more heterodox, and dynamic categories” (118).

Going on to examine more closely the reciprocal relationship between criticality and the “power of the market” (Malik, 2008: 284), Suhail Malik follows Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s delineation of what they describe as ‘artistic critique:’ a mode of critique which “counterpoints the fixity and stability of historical capitalist processes and the interests of social critique with the freedom of art(ists), the rejection of material or spatio-temporal fixing or many other attachments, and the rejection of piety towards work as labour (rather than play), reaching a heightened expression around May 1968” (292). The significance of artistic critique for Boltanski and Chiapello is its uptake by which it purports to critique - as we moved into a post-industrial economy composed of services, experiences and fluid interactivity, artistic

critique has come to become a constituent part of ‘the new spirit of Capitalism’. Reviewing the corpus of eighties-nineties (French) management textbooks, the authors describe

“this new spirit – autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphic capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialisations of old division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experiences, being attached to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 97)

which is rhetorically isomorphic with the social turn. Malik’s interest in this insidious affinity is to recognise this type of rhetoric at play in what he calls the “primary market” of art which gives value to the language and methods of critique (it gains value by appearing to distance itself from commerce) while the secondary market “extends to anything and everything more or less indifferently” (288). Here, without explicitly realising, Malik is in-part describing the dynamic *hypereconomy* of contemporary art wherein the “situational” (Chislenko and Ramakrishnan, 1998) knowledge of criticality produces value for a primary community and thus allows the apparently “irreducible surplus of art” (Malik, 2008: 284) to attain value for a secondary market.

Of course, each of these authors’ arguments are more nuanced than presented here. But the primary aim of this review has been to illustrate and expand on Larsen’s positioning of the work of the social turn in relation to “the governmentality of our time” and to identify the practices and rhetoric of the long nineties as a prevalent *orthodoxy*. I have focused on the keystone of ‘criticality’ as the naturalised “generic definition of art” (Beech, 2018: 4) which is thus to make a *descriptive* claim regarding the long nineties as a deeply-entrenched, multi-scalar and multi-agent orthodoxy, rather than a judgement of its moral consistency. By looking to the work surrounding SR, we can also perceive further orthodox presumptions of the long nineties that are far more elemental yet certainly related. Namely, that of a profound

anthropocentrism that sets the operational coordinates for practices such as critique.

While Vishimdt has concluded a “structurally affirmative” function in the participatory criticality propounded by Rogoff and instantiated in the work of the long nineties, Rogoff herself does declare a broader ambition: “‘Criticality’ as I perceive it is precisely in the operations of recognising the limitations of one’s thought for one does not learn something new until one unlearns something old, otherwise one is simply adding information rather than rethinking a structure” (Rogoff, 2003: n.p.). While this formulation seems to provide the foundation for thinking *heretically* with regards to dominant structures, institutions and orthodoxy, it is crucial to ask: *how* is one (or rather, how is art) ‘rethinking’ such structures? What *models* are being inherited and/or built for such thinking?

Furthermore, this focus on criticality allows us to ask in the coming sections: what is it that makes speculation *qualitatively* different from critique? Or, does the work of the speculative turn rather permit and implement, following the logic of *heresy*, a “transvaluation of critique” (Chandler, 2019)?

### **2.1.2 The Cognitive Ecology of the Long Nineties: The Cognitive Inertia of ‘Carte Blanche’**

So even though the work of the social turn has evidently pursued forms of praxis that are embedded and embodied through the complex interrelations of ‘the social’ (“down in it” as Larsen puts it, or “operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness” as Rogoff says), there remains a more ambiguous form of detachment; an overlooked remainder of the academic idealism the social turn sought to extricate itself from. Bishop alludes to an element of this problem in her observation of social turn projects whereby the full “narratives” they generate are often only visible to curators and institutional stakeholders while artists move on to produce more work, leaving

their projects to unfold in such-and-such a context or community, while audiences themselves might only engage from a limited perspective (Bishop, 2012: 6). Thus, these narratives are primarily significant to institutional curators as brokers of the *value* of such work, for art history and for art markets.

What I will now review is this overlooked remainder of academic idealism. How such formally *catalytic* projects enact and instill an ideological commitment to a liberal humanism through a dogmatic faith in indeterminacy, openness, and participatory criticality actually prompts a *speculative foreclosure* in thinking. These orthodoxies counteractively dilute the ambition to “rethinking a structure” (Rogoff, 2003: n.p.). That is, when Rogoff addresses contemporary art’s social interstices as sites for the “production of knowledge” when they are “existing in the realm of potentiality and possibility rather than that of exclusively material production” (Rogoff, 2003), attention must be paid to *how* this knowledge is produced: what are the epistemological coordinates for Rogoff’s ‘realm of potentiality and possibility’? What defines its horizons? How do the artistic and curatorial practices to which Rogoff refers inhabit, navigate and contribute to this realm, or, possibility space? I suggest that this realm is not so much an active form of potentiality but is rather a homeostatic maintenance of orthodoxy and the Overton window; one apparatus among many others (for art of course does have a limited reach and must be considered among a nexus of other creative, political, technological, educational and communicative forms) that constitutes “the hierarchy of cultural-cognitive governance” (Donald, 2006: 6). Despite a rhetoric of possibility, potential, and revolution (e.g Hirschhorn: 2017) such projects do not contribute to altering “the prevailing images and worldview of their societies” (Donald, 2006: 6).

This valorisation of indeterminacy, openness, and participatory criticality as means towards instantiating Rogoff’s realm of possibility (for codifying thinking and action) is a mannerism of the long nineties, assumed by its

practitioners as inherently politically virtuous *in itself*.<sup>59</sup> I identify such traits with what the writer and curator Matthew Poole describes as the dominant and subjectivising “parameters of a liberal Humanist democratic political and ethical nexus” (Poole, 2010: 97). As such, the valorisation of bottom-up self-organisation, the primacy of lived experience, and a performative “formalism of dissent” (Vishmidt, 2014: 258) geared towards the performance of “productive tensions” (O’Neill, 2012: 120), have culminated in the orthodox mannerisms of the long nineties: the parameters of the Overton window are thus established. Building on the work of Poole along with Beech and Malik, such criteria further embody the ambiguous relationship between power and the lasting orthodoxies sedimented by the social turn.

So, I will now turn the focus of the discussion away from the intention to foreground the *contradictions* of the social turn as exemplified in Vishmidt’s critique.<sup>60</sup> Instead, I present the mannerisms of the long nineties as forming a contingent *cognitive ecology*, in order to ascertain some purchase on what Rogoff means by the “realm of potentiality and possibility” (in the “production of knowledge”). What *kind* of knowledge, enquiry, modelling and reason is enabled by such an ecology and its socio-cognitive technologies? What forms, ideas, relations, mental models, and subjects does it (re)produce? How does the long nineties think?

I have selected a single example that is broadly emblematic and embodies these mannerisms: the aptly-named *Carte Blanche* (2008-09) at Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst (GfKZ) conceptualised and led by (then-)museum director Barbara Steiner. This example has been selected for its explicit,

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<sup>59</sup> Bishop sought to overturn this by working to “restore attention to the modes of conceptual and affective complexity generated by socially oriented art project;” (8) “analys[ing] and compar[ing] this work *as art*, since this is the institutional field in which it is endorsed and disseminated, even while the category of art remains a persistent exclusion in debates about such projects.” (13)

<sup>60</sup> As well as, for example, Bishop’s criticism of the social turn’s active/passive binary: “This argument... assumes that the poor can only engage physically, while the middle classes have the leisure to think and critically reflect.”



emblematic fidelity to an enduring set of *fundamental* orthodox assumptions that, through a naturalised suite of methods and practices introduced in the above review, contribute to the sedimentation of a cognitive ecology that the speculative turn considers to be inadequate for navigating contemporary concerns. Furthermore, this example is especially appropriate in terms of its position as a *mannerism* of such logic (what I am defining as ‘the long nineties’) rather than as something that is generically associated with the work of the social turn.

*Carte Blanche* (CB) was a two year project consisting of an invitation to eleven private collectors, commercial galleries and business enterprises for them to present the art they collected and worked with through the infrastructure of GfKZ. This gesture required each participant to cover the expenses for each of their own exhibitions including general running costs and advertising. While in return, the museum’s curators and resources were at each participant exhibition’s disposal (including more ambiguous hypereconomic services such as the museum’s ability to enhance the status of works of art (Steiner, 2011: 159), and, as we shall see, the discursive mannerisms and ideals that contribute to cognitive ecologies).<sup>61</sup> Each invited participant was literally given ‘carte blanche’ to approach the project as they see best exemplifies their interests and distinct commitments to art.

Among the aims of this project its lead curator, Barbara Steiner, has outlined a valid interest in exploring alternative forms of funding, hosting, displaying, and sharing art in the face of diminishing availability of public funding. The project represents the implementation of “public negotiation and feedback between the various interests and expectations of those involved in CB with a view toward communicating and exploring these” (Steiner in Hegyi and Steiner, 2015: n.p.). It is indeed an attempt to “re-think a structure” and to produce “knowledge” (Rogoff) not by critique but by through Rogoff’s rhetoric

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<sup>61</sup> Or, to put it in the hyperstitional terms mentioned in footnote 24, which fictions are invested in, and consecrated through their situational utility, as reality.

of criticality: CB is very much a project dedicated to toiling among the extant potentialities for alternative ways of doing things provided by its diverse participants.

Again, I am not currently interested in reviewing the controversies and potential contradictions embedded in such a proposal.<sup>62</sup> But rather how the project embodies and operates as a cognitive scaffold for sedimenting and enhancing the shibboleth of the long nineties.

While a “new vocabulary” that Rogoff initiates in her own work towards the (ostensibly heretical) replacement of “inherited words like ‘art,’ ‘audience,’ ‘curator,’ ‘institution,’ and so on” (Rogoff in von Bismarck and Rogoff, 2012: 35) has found purchase as an influential taxonomy (a memetic “user’s guide” even (Rogoff, 2010)), its uptake in a project such as CB has resulted in what Gilles Châtelet has referred to as “the baroque imposture of chaos” (Châtelet, 2014: 50).<sup>63</sup>

In her retrospective catalogue essay for the CB project, Steiner shares how Rogoff’s “concept of criticality... invalidates the hierarchic, asymmetrical relationship between the artist and the audience” (Steiner, 2011: 26). Which

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<sup>62</sup> For example, the publication that documents the development and impact of CB utilised “mainly” public funding for its production. According to GfKZ this illustrated a clear linking of “private commitment to public agendas” (Steiner, 2011: 51). While these links may well be possible to exemplify elsewhere through the project, the stretch Steiner makes in using the book’s public funding as a gesture that makes such links visible in itself is actually emblematic of the project’s tendency to make the activity fit with its ideological commitments regardless of what takes place. The book rather acts as a leveraging of public commitments to private agendas, seeing as it is among the resources of the public museum that enhance the status and value of CB’s participants and their portfolios.

<sup>63</sup> This term is applicable to a vast swathe of projects that emerged through art’s social turn and through the long nineties, when considering this section’s argument. Key works such as Rirkrit Tiraviniya’s catalytic social situations (e.g. *pad thai* (1990), *Utopia Station* (2003), *Soup/No Soup* (2012)), along with key terms such as Bourriaud’s “micro-utopias” which names such “moments of sociability” (Bourriaud, 2002: 33) as the locus for exploring ways of “living and models of action within the existing real” (31), inherently rely upon a valorisation of open and free encounter of individuals as a self-organising force.

informs CB's decisive aim to explore with a variety of commercial and private bodies, along with the institutions' combined publics, rather than to presume a singular position of assumed "truth" (Steiner, 2015: n.p.) that dictates how the economic issues perceived by GfKZ (with its constitutional social responsibilities as a public museum) *ought* to be resolved (Steiner refers to this method as "economic criticality" (Steiner, 2010)). Similarly, Rogoff's emphasis on the concept of potentiality as the inhabitation of "the realm of the possible *without prescribing a plan*" (Rogoff, 2006: 7, emphasis added) reflects precisely CB's aim to provide a framework by which the participants are given the opportunity to freely express their own methods, models, concerns, tastes, and agendas, without institutional coercion. Evident here is a relinquishing of control on the part of GfZK regarding what should be shown, how it should be shown, and to whom it is addressed. With such a gesture, the project immediately invites questions regarding insidious parameters of 'quality' that might lurk beneath the rhetoric of social responsibility adopted by public institutions (Steiner notes that among the various reservations her peers held regarding the project, was the feeling that it would compromise the reputation of the gallery in terms of the quality of work shown (Steiner, 2012: 259)). Which is to say that it corresponds with Rogoff's definition of criticality in that "while building on critique [it] wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames" (Rogoff, 2006: 8).

Thus far, the methodology and the aims of CB seems in some ways to correspond with how I have framed the work of the speculative turn: It implements a revised vocabulary of new terms; it gathers resources in order to explore alternative territories and to reform the perceived Overton window; it weighs the production of knowledge and opportunities to move in new directions instead of via "critical analysis" alone.

However, I will once again defer to Whitehead's definition of speculation. What tethers this project to the long nineties and signifies CB's methodology

as part of its mannerisms, is that it simply remains on “the ground of particular observation.” If Rogoff’s vocabulary (explicitly adopted by Steiner) along with what CB actually *does* is motivated by “a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization” with which to land “for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (Whitehead), I argue that there is no adequate conceptual model proposed therein to direct such a flight beyond a “cultural confinement” that is insidiously, and somewhat paradoxically, engendered in the form of participatory openness and indeterminacy. That by embodying “this form of criticality, of never standing outside while deploying some great analytical apparatus which allows us to ‘know’ to really, really know what is going on,” (8) such projects align their investment in *potentiality* with the absence of any explicit conceptual model or navigational protocol with which to properly catalyse “a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization.” Therefore, although the cognitive ecology of the long nineties is comprised of the rhetoric of possibility and potential (as already noted), exemplary projects such as CB demonstrate inertia within a matrix of fixed possibilities rather than movement beyond it with which to alter the parameters of the Overton window. The *rhetoric* of possibility, potential, and revolution is not enough in itself to foster possibility, potential, and revolution. Such aims are rendered as mere affectation,<sup>64</sup> engendering projects such as CB as “homeostatic” socio-cognitive technologies. They foster a truncation of conceptual resources, crystallising the cognitive ecology of the long nineties in such a way as to limit not only its potential for thinking otherwise and articulating alternatives, but even for performing accurately descriptive and diagnostic functions.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Literature and interviews surrounding CB are rife with references to how the project “continues to be the subject of lively discussions and even controversy” (Steiner in Hegyi and Steiner, 2015: n.p.) yet the content of these discussions are never elaborated, especially in the form of any actionable or at least proposed alternative models or conceptual apparatus. If examples such as CB do in fact develop new concepts, they must remain within their enclave of production and are not articulated for testing and distribution within broader “communities of mind.” Would such concepts provide an “ingress to the real” in terms of, in the case of CB, parsing, navigating, and manipulating the infrastructural conditions that precipitate Steiner’s “economic criticality?”

<sup>65</sup> When attached to projects such as CB or any of the micro-utopian projects of the social turn, such aims instantiate “a radical scaling-down of political and cognitive ambition, [where the best that may be hoped for] is to achieve small-scale rectifications of universal injustice by establishing local, temporally fleeting enclaves of civil justice” (Brassier, 2014: 469).

To justify these assertions I will focus further on CB's rationale and activity: how it embodies a dogmatic faith in openness and indeterminacy as *processes* that are ultimately their only *product*. This is served up especially well by CB in the form of an initial exhibition that was staged to not only introduce the project's participants and the forthcoming sequence of their individual GfKZ takeovers, but also presented a powerful overarching agenda that would come to dominate Steiner's reflections on the project (in the official retrospective publication, interviews, talks, and commissioned essays cited throughout this section). So dominant in fact that it is this agenda that substantiates CB's primary socio-cognitive role in the cognitive ecology of the long nineties.<sup>66</sup> As an introduction to CB the curatorial team of GfKZ presented *Friendly Enemies* (FE), a representative selection of the participants' collections grouped together. FE's title refers directly to political theorist Chantal Mouffe's conception of agonism in her publication *The Democratic Paradox* (Mouffe, 2000: 13).<sup>67</sup> The term 'friendly enemies' is used by Mouffe to indicate the adversarial nature of those "who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way" (Ibid.). Such is her differentiation between adversaries and enemies. With this work, Mouffe sought to overturn the idea that public debate between a multifarious plurality of voices finds resolution or consensus and instead, according to her agonistic model, put forward the image of public space as "the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final

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<sup>66</sup> Therefore, while Rogoff has maintained an astute suspicion of projects that "dictate to audiences their mode of participation" in terms of a foreclosure of the "possibilities for a self-articulation," (Rogoff, 1998: 129) I go on to argue here that not only does the less explicitly prescriptive projects such as CB are just as likely to be sustained by curatorial assumptions but also by broader cultural assumptions.

<sup>67</sup> Mouffe's work found much traction as a theoretical alibi for art of the social turn and the long nineties, and, much like the philosophers of SR who were welcomed into art's discursive networks, she also found herself to be an active voice in contemporary art publications and lectures.

reconciliation” (Mouffe, 2008: 13). Hence, returning to Rogoff’s work, “the point of criticality is not to find an answer but rather to access a different mode of inhabitation” (Rogoff, 2006: n.p.).

Thus CB has *foregrounded* not any deliverables from a project that initially articulated interests in how a public-private partnership model might function (Steiner, 2011: 31) or how private protagonists might be involved in the social agendas of the museum (Steiner, 2012: 258), but rather a rhetoric of “productive interaction,” “implementing frictions,” “setting up points of friction,” and “the productive force of conflicts” (258-263). Apparently conflicts did indeed “break out” which involved “building walls to block the vistas,” the integration of a “gigantic company logo,” and excluding customary “wall text, seats for the visitors, and additional mediation” (260). Given the social rhetoric in the initial aims of the project, this articulation of conflict truly exemplifies Brassier’s observation of a “radical scaling-down of political and cognitive ambition.” For such instances of conflict are more akin to those that would erupt from the agitation surrounding an undergraduate degree show install. The point is, the focus of Steiner and the GfKZ curators was evidently never truly fixed on the production of alternative economic models to resolve an issue (never mind exploring local/global economic infrastructure), nor on articulating new ways in which private partners might bring something to the social agendas of the museum, nor even what activity took place whatsoever. Instead, with the frame set around this activity by FE, all participants were, from the start, considered adversaries before acknowledging whether or how they might “want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.” Regardless of what conflict or tension existed (if any), the role CB has played as a socio-cognitive technology (i.e in its distribution of concepts and models) is to illustrate and enhance the status of a core political model that is here codified as “the imposture of chaos.” The signal promoted (through the project and its continued articulation across contemporary art discourse channels) is *not* any alternative model but rather the signal-boosting of the extant logic of

liberal humanism.<sup>68</sup> If such projects can be described as “homeostatic” then this adversarial friction or agonism constitutes a form of “good citizenship” (Poole, 2010: 97). The openness and indeterminacy of being granted ‘carte blanche’ is a liberal humanist instantiation of “cultural confinement.”<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, with this example we can witness a model of insidious *epistemicide* constitutive of the long nineties as I have defined it. Diverse participants (never mind the diversity of the *artworks* and the propositional potency they might offer as socio-cognitive technologies) who hold views and values different from those of one another and even the host institution are given a platform with which to perform “self-articulation” (Rogoff, 1998: 129) for the sole purpose of exemplifying a collective illustration and institutional enhancement of agonism: this process is the product enhanced through theoretical, rhetorical, and museological sanctification. This model permits institutions such as GfKZ and curator-ideologues such as Steiner to take up a moralising posture that is a radical yet measured sophistication in the sense that CB was about handling conflicts and promoting productive debate. However the particularities of “self-articulation” (never mind the unforeseen hybrid models or partnerships, that is, the *actual* “potentialities”) were evidently not as

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<sup>68</sup> Mouffe posits her agonistic model as a *counterpoint* to “the typical liberal understanding of pluralism” whereby the multitude of perspectives and values cannot be shared by all but nonetheless “when put together, they constitute an harmonious ensemble” (Mouffe, 2008: 8). However, this reformulation of liberalism is akin to Rogoff’s reformulation of critique *qua* criticality. My point is that, as with criticality, agonism, as it is instantiated through CB, is ultimately directed towards the preservation of manifest norms as a “homeostatic” (Vishmidt) technology rather than the rational articulation of new norms. With “the creation of agonistic public spaces, where the objective is to unveil all that is repressed by the dominant consensus” projects such as CB and those that Mouffe reviews, simply foreground the significance of debate and tension as an end in itself, without indicating any navigational import (in Whitehead’s terms, there is no subsequent “rational interpretation” because the suite of assumptions discussed in this chapter as codifying the long nineties are committed to abjuring rationalist approaches in favour of sustained tension).

Agonism, and its implementation as a mannerism of critical art practice, is a manufacturing of polite dissent. Despite the invitation for diverse participation their multi-modal cognitive processes are eclipsed by a single mode of thinking.

<sup>69</sup> Amanda Beech has explored through her art works, such as *Statecraft* (2008), “the very forceful rhetoric that we find within narratives of freedom” (Beech, 2009: n.p.).

significant as it was to demonstrate “a vibrant agonistic public sphere of contestation” (Steiner, 2012: 264).

## 2.2 A Speculative Schism

### 2.2.1 ‘New Formulations of Togetherness’

Such catalytic projects that alter the parameters of the exhibition space and the curatorial project in order to conceive a space of indeterminate outcome can best be summarised by Brassier’s reflection on the production of concepts in theory: “experiment at the level of form can mask conservatism at the level of content, while conservatism at the level of form may harbour extraordinary radicality at the level of content” (Brassier in Brassier and Mattin, 2006: n.p.). For what CB’s latent ‘content’ is eclipsed by is the foregrounding of its ‘form’ as its primary cognitive resource.

N. Katherine Hayles, a prominent critic and theorist attached to posthuman discourses, discusses cultural artefacts in terms of “cognitive assemblages” which reflects the previous chapter’s illustration of the inhabitation of cognitive ecologies comprised of socio-cognitive technologies (Hayles, 2017). I mention Hayles’ formulation as her term is useful for foregrounding the malleable (*re-*)*constructibility* of such assemblages, our *agency* within them and in their *assembly* as cognitive scaffolding (how agency can be reformulated). That is, these artefacts include contemporary art and its discursive regimes which scaffold ways of thinking. Cognition includes but is not limited to “the entanglements and interpenetrations of human and technical cognitive systems” (40). Models are manipulable “technologies of investigation” (Morrison), and the model promoted by CB, and other such catalytic projects of the long nineties, is that of a sociality converged around an image of itself as an “imposture of chaos” - the dynamism, friction and tension of debate among discrete actors, as per a liberal paradigm is itself the model.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> While I have noted in the previous chapter that the speculative turn instantiates a



The inadequacy of such a model as cognitive scaffolding is evident in the kind of inertia illustrated here: it does not foster construction, merely a simulacrum of it. The biologist Ludwig Fleck was already attentive to such impediments to the development of the sciences in 1979, in his discussion of scientific descriptions (the metaphors and conceptual models used to identify, parse, and describe natural processes) which are often “quite secure within the confines of a given thought style” (Fleck, 1979: 38). So I thus follow the prompt given in the aforementioned work of Emily Martin (section 1.2.1) who notes that “the models that biologists use to describe their data can have important social effects,” which for her, means the imposition of incongruous concepts such as the intentional action of “personhood” on reproductive processes (Martin, 1991: 500) resulting in significant repercussions on issues such as abortion rights. In the case of CB and the long nineties, the sedimentation and *distribution* of an image of social choreography as a productive end in itself curtails the advancement of alternatives to orthodoxy. “New research, old imagery” as Martin puts it (Ibid.).

Against such mannerisms, Beech supports the significance of contemporary art’s role in the production of alternative models, or as she puts it, a “thought-image” (Beech, 2013: 85)<sup>71</sup>, rather than its role in the mute illustration of orthodoxy. In such images speculative opportunities are offered to think beyond the long nineties’ cultural confinement. While the long nineties evidently adopts Rogoff’s suspicion of art’s *explicitly* instructive elements as somewhat dictatorial and a foreclosure of potentiality (despite the evidence that the socio-cognitive distribution of ‘criticality’ and ‘agonism’ *implicitly* instructs inertia

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cognitive ecology composed of “discursive practices [that] constitute the game of giving and asking for reasons and outlining the space of reason as a landscape of navigation rather than as *a priori* access to explicit norms” (Negarestani), what is evident in the current discussion is a reversal of this: the *a priori* implementation of norms that eclipse discursive practices and their latent potentialities.

<sup>71</sup> “I would offer the dynamic of the ‘thought-image’ to consider the force of materials as condition of the concept.”

and conceptual stasis)<sup>72</sup>, I will go on to analyse the distributed production of such models as *navigational protocols* that operate as a *speculative wager*.<sup>73</sup> Larsen has intimated towards this in his provocative conclusion to *The Long Nineties*:

“Perhaps it is time to re-conceptualize the aesthetic as a *mode of thinking* in order to articulate difference, new outsides and the transcendental, understood as the condition of historical practices and that which lies at the edge of social relations. The present cannot only be changed from its inside. To regain its futurity it must be reconfigured from afar, too.” (Larsen, emphasis added)

Given the previous chapter’s focus on the implications of SR-related discourses and how they have motivated contemporary art’s recent history, we can also say that a *deeper* yet related orthodoxy upheld by such projects is that of a correlationist “sociocentrism” or “human exceptionalism” (Connolly, 2017: 20). SR, then, shares a variety of methods for attempting to overcome this orthodox humanist parochialism; the “underlying supposition that knowledges are actively socially constructed rather than unearthed from a mind-independent universe” (Mulholland, 2019a).<sup>74</sup> And as such, breaches the “old imagery” and conceptual models that forecloses access to, and hinders the production of knowledge that copes with, the manifold infrastructural and climatological conditions we inhabit. Curator Matthew Poole has also considered the inhibiting effects of a pervasive nexus of liberal humanism and asks, “what happens if the individual human subject is not considered as the

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<sup>72</sup> “the true effectiveness of power is *all the more savage for its invisibility*, that the horizontal formations... *accelerate* the concentration of foci of decision making that can act discreetly everywhere and nowhere, without this confrontation being compromised by any of the pomp of overly visible verticalities” (Châtelet, 2014: 108).

<sup>73</sup> “Democracy is not deduced from an optimization of preexisting possibilities but emerges through a wager... on the excellence of the multitude’s virtualities and its ability to distribute them” (Châtelet, 2014: 156)

<sup>74</sup> “Knowledge democracy refers to an interrelationship of phenomena. First, it acknowledges the importance of the existence of multiple epistemologies, or ways of knowing, such as organic, spiritual and land-based systems, frameworks arising from our social movements, and the knowledge of the marginalized or excluded everywhere, or what is sometimes referred to as subaltern knowledge. Second, it affirms that knowledge is both created and represented in multiple forms, including text, image, numbers, story, music, drama, poetry, ceremony and meditation” (Tandon, Singh, Clover and Hall, 2016).

privileged figure around which our organizing principles are arranged? What happens if artworks (traditionally subjectivized objects) are de-subjectivized in this network of associations?”<sup>75</sup> Such questions are motivated towards speculating about “other ways of subjectivizing ourselves in new formulations of ‘togetherness’” that do not adhere to the sociocentric models of the long nineties, fostering alternative models that emerge from the ontological dethronement of the human subject (Poole, 2010: 100).

We can turn now to examples that have an explicit attachment to the speculative turn and to SR. Specifically those that have operated according to the logics of OOP such as Christov-Bakargiev’s *dOCUMENTA (13)* introduced in chapter 1. With its enactment of a “vibrant materialism” (Bennet, 2010; Mulholland, 2019a) that is foregrounded by the project through a wealth of historical artworks picked from modernity, new commissions, sacred objects, eco-architectural prototypes, publications, letters, lemonade stalls, borrowed objects, scientific projects, geological samples, video footage of protests, found objects and even processes of botanic colonisation, we might take up Latour’s questions to counter the orthodoxies crystallised through the long nineties: “Will a different democracy become necessary? A democracy extended to things?” (Latour, 1997: 12).

This list of “participants” (which was the term used by Christov-Bakargiev to refer to these presentations as the term ‘artist’ was too narrow (Schoene, 2012: 36)) resembles a trope known as a “Latour litany” which describes diverse “bestiaries of things” (Bogost, 2012: 49). This trope is playfully emblematic of the kind of a *flat ontology* subscribed to by Harman and other proponents of object-oriented philosophies. In the context of *dOCUMENTA (13)* such a heterogeneous assembly is representative of a broad re-conceptualisation of ‘the social’ in that it conceives of persons, things, natural process, and events as interconnected, exerting agency on one another as actors

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<sup>75</sup> The question is echoed in Malik’s articulation of the correlationist network of interpretation that “completes” the artwork (Malik, 2015).

of an equal ontological status. It offers the conceptual revision of social relations as “person-things” that are “mutually enmeshed” (Mulholland, 2019a);<sup>76</sup> as an ecology of entities whose ontological flattening contends that “all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally” (Bogost, 2012: 11).

“The Brain” of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, then, is Christov-Bakargiev’s Rosetta Stone and illustration of what it is to think in and *through* a cognitive ecology of diverse things when they are understood not as discrete bounded entities “but an assembly of relations” (Chan quoted in Farquharson and Wilson-Goldie, 2012: n.p). It represents a synthetic and modular cognitive assemblage where the aggregate of artefacts and the natural processes of materials establish a dynamic model for Laruelle’s proposition that “thinking is everywhere” (Ó Maoilearca, 2015: 175). Like a living brain that consists of an archive of memories, beliefs, conceptual models, and neuroplastic tendencies, “The Brain” of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, following the inferences of ExC, is located among myriad external resources whose variable portability with an internal neural operating system demonstrates a transformative cognitive augmentation. This way of approaching the aggregate materials of the exhibition, and their cognitive integration, is articulated in its accompanying publication:

“When an artwork is looked at closely, it becomes, as in meditation, an ever more abstract exercise, a thinking and imagining while thinking, until the phenomenology of that viscous experience *allows the mind to merge with matter*, and slowly, possibly, *to see the world not from the point of view of the discerning subject, the detached subject, but from within so-called objects and outward*” (Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke, 2012, emphases added).

The final point in Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke’s statement here is crucial to the curatorial strategy and its work in the speculative “formulations of ‘togetherness’” prompted by Poole. Here, “The Brain” and the deliberately sprawling assemblage of distributed works, projects, publications, partner

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<sup>76</sup> Latour’s example of such assemblages is presented in his discussion (Latour, 1999: 180) of agency in response to the US gun lobby’s dictum ‘guns don’t kill people, people do.’ Latour ascribes agency to neither gun nor person but the hybrid-assemblage “person-with-gun.” It is with this specific assemblage that a form of action is enabled, and, I suggest, a specific form of thought.

exhibitions, talks and seminars that constituted *dOCUMENTA (13)* recall philosopher C. S. Peirce's reflection on the 18<sup>th</sup> century French aristocrat and founder of modern chemistry's cognitive extension across the material affordances of his laboratory:

Lavoisier's method was... to dream that some long and complicated chemical process would have a certain effect, to put it into practice with dull patience, after its inevitable failure, to dream that with some modifications it would have another result, and to end by publishing the last dream as a fact: *his way was to carry his mind into his laboratory, and literally to make of his alembics and cucurbits instruments of thought, giving a new conception of reasoning as something which was to be done with one's eyes open, in manipulating real things instead of words and fancies.*" (Peirce, 1998: 5.363, emphasis added)

The works of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, as socio-cognitive technologies, fulfil this "outward" perspective through exemplifying an interconnected field of relations and perspectives beyond that of a subjectively codified and discrete *umwelt*.<sup>77</sup> As with Christov-Bakargiev's refusal of a primary curatorial "concept" for the quinquennial, keystone works such as Pierre Huyghe's *Untilled* and Song Dong's *Doing Nothing Garden* explicitly defer their compositional agency to the "vibrant" anonymous, inhuman processes of organic and atmospheric contingencies. Huyghe in his artist statement notes

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<sup>77</sup> In his 'A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans' (Uexküll, 2010), biologist, philosopher, and progenitor of 'biosemiotics' Jakob von Uexküll outlined what he called the *Umwelten* of various organisms: ticks, sea urchins, amoebae, jellyfish, and sea worms. *Umwelt* was defined as a living being's perception of its environment derived from biological information processed by their distinct sensorimotor systems: a subjective frame of reference peculiar to each species. Conversely, he distinguished the concept of *Umgebung* as that of an *Umwelt* perceived by another species – the situation of one organism observed through a differently conditioned *Umwelt*. By these terms, the ecology of any environment is a proliferation, an entanglement even, of diverse *Umwelten*. von Uexküll's 'theoretical biology' is, to some extent, useful for approaching the polyplexity of contemporary ecologies, and elaborating their historical distinctions. What von Uexküll's multitude of *Umwelten* presents, however, is an ecology comprised of discrete subject-units with individual life-words; biological filter bubbles that mediate environments according to the necessary information, or "carriers of significance," that allow an organism to survive and flourish. It is easy to see within this way of looking at ecologies, its relationship with dominant understandings of embodiment, selfhood, subjecthood and individuality; a modern ontological seedbed for Neoliberal sociality and its platform-marketplace of manufactured *Umwelten* (see section 3.1).

that *Untilled* comprised no “choreography” or “organization,” that there were indeed “rules” but not “a policy” (Huyghe, 2012). This work is essentially Huyghe’s demarcation of an existing and largely unaltered composting area of the nearby Karlsaue Park. With only a small label marking a walkway leading towards what is apparently an unoccupied space, Huyghe draws attention to the extant ambient ecologies with equally subtle interventions such as the presence of a groundskeeper, a beehive set to replace a reclining sculpture’s head, and the introduction of marijuana and hallucinogenic plant specimens to the area. Meanwhile Dong recounts a Taoist practice of “doing nothing,” of “non-action” (Dong, 2012), that enabled the botanic propagation and colonisation of two 20-foot piles of landfill that disrupted the otherwise cultivated landscape of Karlsaue Park’s lawn area.

Reflections on *dOCUMENTA (13)* have noted that Huyghe’s work was challenging to actually locate (von Hantelmann, 2017; Viso, 2012) while Dong’s use of accumulated biological waste and rubble speaks to that which is siphoned and partitioned away from the comfort of modern life. However, both materially and emphatically exist and act in ways that are not codified as immediately relevant, and even visible, within the modern liberal human sensorium. Ryan Gander’s intervention within the ground floor of the Fridericianum building’s ground floor helps with this point. *I Need Some Meaning I Can Memorise (The Invisible Pull)* by Gander calls for an artificially produced light breeze to occupy this space, “not a strong wind, not immediately recognizable as artificial, but physical enough to create a moment of wonder in the viewer” (Gander in Christov-Bakargiev, 2012). This similarly subtle gesture intimates towards the activity and processes that affect us, on the precipice of our perceptual capabilities and beyond. And while Gander’s intervention is manufactured and calculated in a way that *Untilled* and *Doing Nothing Garden* is not, such invisible agencies though situated beyond our perceptive threshold, are nonetheless also part of artefacts such as hard and soft forms of infrastructure.

Here we can find some purchase on Christov-Bakargiev and Funcke's seemingly abstruse and merely poetic conviction that "the phenomenology of that viscous experience allows the mind to merge with matter." When Larsen proposes that to gain some direction and leave behind the long nineties submitting present conditions to be "re-configured from afar," we can find in *dOCUMENTA (13)* the reconfiguration of subjective *umwelten* through the re-codification of inert objects as actants or participants in our social and political lives: "The question is not whether we give dogs or strawberries permission to vote, but how a strawberry can assert its political intention" (Christov-Bakargiev quoted in Birnbaum, 2012). In the case of *Untilled* we see for instance the placement of the beehive as a sculpture's head or another 'brain,' an allusion to a kind of 'hive' mentality that is significantly interconnected among the life around it and beyond (we need only think of recent worries regarding the declining population of bees and what further impact this has for other forms of life on earth in terms of deeply affecting botanic propagation). Considering his works often as unscripted 'scenarios,' it is evident here that a kind of expansion of the logics of the social turn are at work: an open space of relationality and sociality, yet played out on a multi-scalar, multi-species, and even multi-ambient level. That is, as an artefact *Untilled* works towards the augmentation of the subjective constitution and "'unweltic' horizon" of its human participants.<sup>78</sup> the philosopher of mathematical physics, Gabrel Catren refers to this as a "speculative subject" which "besides being able to modify its actual experience by changing its state in its Umwelt, also affords mutations of the very transcendental frame that defines the "umweltic" horizon of its possible experiences" (Catren, 2016: n.p.).

However, it should be noted that in understanding the political import of such things in terms of their 'intentionality' is to fall prey to an anthropocentrism that provokes Birnbaum in his review of the quinquennial. Instead of erroneously conferring an anthropomorphic intentionality upon

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<sup>78</sup> "The human body shapes and supports the particularity of a place, and so do artworks" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012: 7).

matter, processes, or strawberries, Christov-Bakargiev need not focus resolutely on things in themselves so much as the forms of agency they gather within dynamic fields of relations, and conversely, how human agency and reasoning is transformed in such a way (for example, in the results achieved by Lavoisier through his laboratory-as-cognitive assemblage, but also, as I am suggesting, in the revision of the subjective *umwelt*).

While Mulholland surmises that “we are, *perhaps*, more likely to appreciate the landfill [of Dong’s *Doing Nothing Garden*] from the biotic perspective of what it hosts” (Mulholland, 2019a), he also, crucially, considers this perspective as a mutual “transfiguration” that acts as a corrective to the intentionality conferred by Christov-Bakargiev:

“Dong enlists unremarkable vibrant matter, not to venerate it over the human *dasein*, but, rather, to allow it to ‘relic’ us, its audience. The transfiguration of the rubbish heap only occurs when it entangles human relations, enabling it to be contemplated as a horticultural art installation and/or as an exemplum of natural history. From an anthropocentric perspective, *Doing Nothing Garden*’s growth, its agency, its transfiguration remains tied to it activating and embodying human relations.” (Mulholland, 2019a)<sup>79</sup>

If we consider that the works mentioned here by Huyghe, Dong, and Gander are not simply nonhuman vibrant materials or processes, but a *composite* of these things *and* the human relations with which they are entangled, including the decisional work of the artists. The somewhat more hands-off approaches of the artists do not remove them from the works so much as attempt to enact a flat ontology of agentic possibilities. And, through the aggregation of such works via the expansive and distributed platform of *dOCUMENTA (13)* as an institution that further memetically enhances and disseminates such ways of

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<sup>79</sup> The phrase used here, “to ‘relic’” is an example of a concept immanently configured through the artistic research of the Confraternity of Neoflagellants, of which Mulholland is a member. It describes the dynamic co-constitution of a hybrid entity as a “subject-object” (Confraternity of Neoflagellants, 2013: 135). The work of Kodwo Eshun, which has focused on the speculative incursions of the sonic materials of modern black-diasporic music, similarly enacts a “non-logocentric vision” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012) as *dOCUMENTA (13)* and “transmaterializes your sensorium through the onomatopoeic illogic called HipHop” (Eshun, 1998: 12).



thinking through its influence across international art worlds. The ‘biennialisation’ of such discourses is inarguably a signal boost for SR and its experimental application in fostering new and critical ways to “see the world not from the point of view of the discerning subject, the detached subject, but from within so-called objects and outward.”

This renewal of critical perspectives according to the inferences of SR and SR-related discourses is something embedded in Christov-Bakargiev’s primary aims with *dOCUMENTA (13)*:

“The emancipatory potential for thinking in new ways without producing constituted knowledge that is instrumental and easily transformed into negotiable investments could lie in an accord between human and the many non-human intelligences, affects and beliefs, emotions and forms of trust, that can be established among all the life-forms on the planet. This doesn’t indicate less interest in humanity and people, their lives and cultures, their art and imaginations. It is based on the principle that more potential lies in “becoming-with” than in mistrust, fear, and competition over resources and possibilities.” (Christov-Bakargiev)

Thus the works, projects, and curatorial strategies of *dOCUMENTA (13)* embody a proposal to revise some of the inherent assumptions embedded in the terms with which the social turn and the long nineties have operated. For example the “common symbolic space” that Mouffe posits as the contested ground upon which the adversarial processes of agonism takes place and that has been the space in which the critical analysis of power relations has been conducted according to a humanist orthodoxy ultimately allows for a constricted perspective. Commenting on the tradition of critical theory, Levi Bryant has noted

“It’s tendency is to see *all* power as semiotic or discursive and to see all beings as effects of the signifier, foreclosing the role that non-signifying entities play in exercising power or social relations, and making it difficult to analyze the real properties of nonhuman entities and the differences they make in the world” (Bryant, 2013: 19)

And so on one hand *dOCUMENTA (13)* offers exemplary applications of Bryant’s alternative model of a *borromean critical theory* that pays attention to

the non-signifying agentic entities inhabiting Lacan's Imaginative and Real realms, *in addition to* that of the Symbolic. This model offers the opportunity to revise our common understanding of what constitutes a social space, what inhabits it and what it can be; with the knotting together of the social and the real that subsists beyond or beneath our "umweltic horizon" (Catren), we can "open a space for perhaps unrecognised ways in which power functions to perpetuate unjust social relations" (Bryant, 2013: 20). Furthermore, this space is populated by the kind of "speculative subject" that (contrary to the assumptions of a liberal humanism, and even Mouffe's "radical" model that determines subjects to be discrete, bounded, and individually constituted discursive units) embodies a constitutive essence of reviseability.

Commensurate with this, is an instantiation of Latour's question regarding a revised democracy, where agonism might better be understood as a mutual entanglement. The multiple scales of real properties of nonhuman entities, when understood as significantly pertaining to social relations and an expanded symbolic space, operate as a "vector of revision" (Negarestani, 2014: 435).<sup>80</sup> As well as revising an "umweltic horizon" the orthodox formalisation of what a 'human' *is* has thus been reconfigured.<sup>81</sup> I will explore this idea in more detail in the final chapter but I have already established the extended modularity of cognition while the psychoactive plants introduced into Karlsaue Park by Huyghe, as well as embodying a contested political and legal profile and geopolitical status, allude to the interactive potency of the human biome, that a single subject contains not an immutable essence but rather a contingent population of cells, biota, fungi, bacteria, and other organisms that react in varying ways with the (often invisible) world around us. When Larsen suggests

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<sup>80</sup> "Inhumanism is the extended practical elaboration of humanism; it is born out of a diligent commitment to the project of enlightened humanism. As a universal wave that erases the self-portrait of man drawn in sand, inhumanism is a vector of revision. It relentlessly revises what it means to be human by removing its supposed evident characteristics and preserving certain invariances. At the same time, inhumanism registers itself as a demand for construction, to define what it means to be human by treating human as a constructible hypothesis, a space of navigation and intervention."

<sup>81</sup> Christov-Bakargiev asks in a curatorial statement: "What does it mean to know things that are not physically perceivable to us through our senses? What is the meaning of the exercise of orienting in thought towards these location?" (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012: 7)

that the orthodoxies of the present must be “reconfigured from afar,” we see in examples such as these that real processes and nonhuman entities existing at diverse scales and participating in invisible ecologies (which include our own cognitive and biotic development) are capable of fulfilling his suggestion.

The instantiation of this heretical turn in thinking with contemporary art is embodied in some of the subtle decisions of *dOCUMENTA (13)* as an entity. For example, the commissioned intervention in the Documenta typeface by the graphic design company Leftloft suggest that the “case-sensitive inversion... expresses the reversal of the order and a dynamic desire for renewal” (Leftloft). And, the *dOCUMENTA (13)* publication which collected its series of commissioned pamphlets, interviews, statements, and essays into a single book was named *The Book of Books*, which seems to deliberately play with the tone of theological scripture, here re-written as a heretical gesture of renewal. However, I will conclude this section with some critical analysis and challenges to the speculative turn *as it is exemplified in projects such as dOCUMENTA (13)*, specifically in terms of articulating “new forms of ‘togetherness.’” My concluding examination of the work of *dOCUMENTA (13)* turns on questioning its implementation of what I call the speculative turn’s constitutive axiomatic heresy. This will also be compared to some of my own curatorial projects which motivated some of my earlier Ph.D. research, the exhibitions *Exta* (2015), *CHEMHEX EXTRACT* (2016), and *Vaporents* (2016).

Here, I am concerned with the formal resonances of *dOCUMENTA (13)*’s curatorial and artistic ‘openness’, with that of CB and the catalytic work of the long nineties. As already noted, *dOCUMENTA (13)* consciously departed from the quinquennial’s formulation of a guiding “curatorial concept” and was rather exemplified in the open field of relations (the “frenetic dance”) that “The Brain” set up, along with the explicit “doing nothing” of Dong’s earthwork and the “untilled” framework of Huyghe’s open-ended scenario. While I have argued that the material contingencies of such works have enabled a “transfiguration” of the subjective *umwelt*, the question remains: how is this

expanded field of relations structured? According to what conceptual framework does one conceptualise, represent, and codify the (re)formulation of a field of social relations, its actors, and the interactions therein? Is this a conceptual framework that enables the construction of the kind of conceptual machinery that enables a manipulative and agentic “ingress to the real” (Brassier)? I approach these questions via the anthropological work carried out under the project of TTT (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastel, 2007; Holbraad, 2011; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017) as well as Laruelle’s formal construction and articulation of what he calls non-philosophy.

The function of this openness and indeterminacy in CB, I argued, further sedimented latent assumptions in the organisation of participatory expression and “self-articulation.” This confirmed a bias towards the liberal humanist representation of a democratic space, which behaved as a technology of homeostasis and cognitive inertia. In the case of *dOCUMENTA (13)* I submit that in its embracing of curatorial and artistic ‘hands-off’ methods, it indeed answers Latour’s question regarding the extension of a democracy extended to things. A “thought-image” of a revised democracy whereby the political impact (or as Christov-Bakargiev would have it, the intentionality) of nonhuman things, natural processes, anonymous materials, and even ‘invisible’ human artefacts such as distributed infrastructure, is imbricated with the social life of humans. My question is whether this “thought-image” is actually a revised concept reshaped by the native contingencies that the works present, or, following the method of TTT, even though there is a clear effacing of the ontological boundary between ‘people’ and ‘things,’ does *dOCUMENTA (13)* rescind the analytical status and opportunities inherent to ‘things’ by binding them to “an alternative ontological order (e.g. that of collectives, assemblages or the Actor Network)” rather than “free[ing] it from any ontological determination whatsoever” (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 210)?

*dOCUMENTA (13)* in its formal instantiation of openness and indeterminacy, and in its imposition of anthropocentric qualities such as

intentionality, agency, and even democracy to things, determines a fixed space of probabilities for thinking. Christov-Bakargiev intends to explore “thinking in new ways,” to see “from within so-called objects and outward,” yet does so within parameters that confer human qualities on things rather than heuristically and speculatively interrogating the native “conceptual affordances” of things (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 217). Rather than thinking from within things, this is an anthropocentric ensouling of them. For TTT the alternative method involves “*de-theorizing* the thing, by emptying it out of its many analytical connotations, rendering it a purely ethnographic ‘form’ ready to be filled out contingently,” to “heuristically disentangle things from people, in order to explore how far and in what ways the former make their own kinds of difference to the way they can be conceptualized” (216). Christov-Bakargiev herself cites philosopher of feminism and science Karen Barad’s encouragement that “we understand how matter matters” (Barad, 2003: 803).

To make of this statement more than simply an empty slogan it is crucial to consider once again the careful material construction of cognitive assemblages, which includes conceptual models, in order to open “critique to a more inclusive and powerful set of resources with which to analyze the contemporary situation that confronts us, including but not limited to the entanglements and interpenetrations of human and technical cognitive systems” (Hayles, 2017: 40). Hayles continues, “providing the conceptual scaffolding for such analyses is therefore a profoundly political act” (141). Just as Lavoisier augmented his dreams with his “instruments of thought,” his alembics and cucurbits, it matters precisely *what* populates our laboratories, which artefacts constitute our cognitive ecology (versus the apparent arbitrariness of “The Brain”).

So, when Poole asks what “happens if the individual human subject is not considered as the privileged figure around which our organizing principles are arranged,” this means meeting the “de-subjectivized” artwork and its “conceptual affordances” by emptying “out the notion of ‘thing’ of its contingently a priori metaphysical contents” before we “formulate a way of

allowing it to be filled by (potentially) alternative ones in each ethnographic instance” (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 211). I propose that such a formulation depends on the construction of conceptual models as “technologies of investigation;” as the cognitive scaffolding with which to replace outmoded or inappropriate alembics and cucurbits.

My own practical exploration of how this would work will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter. My curatorial projects are concerned with the exploratory articulation of a “speculative subject,” (what Laruelle refers to as “Subject = X” - a futural subjectivity simulated, or in his idiosyncratic vocabulary, “cloned,” using the transcendental material which comprises the real in order to foster new decisional procedures rather than imposing those of philosophy (Laruelle, 2012: 15)),<sup>82</sup> and concomitant “formulations of ‘togetherness.’” That is, my own projects participate among a milieu of contemporary art for whom a collective inferential modelling constitutes their procedural heresy. While Christov-Bakargiev purports that “the human body shapes and supports the particularity of a place, and so do artworks” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012: 7), this milieu and my projects question the debilitating presumptions inherent in the articulation of ‘the human body’ as a universal model.<sup>83</sup>

Speculative reconfigurations of such bodies present “the hypothesis of a body as something which is produced or manufactured, distributed or allocated, [so that] we can also think about the means of its production” (Vishmidt, 2017). That is, by testing and exploring the limits of the body as “thought-

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<sup>82</sup> Brassier describes this simulated “Alien-subject” as “an organon devoid of every residue of phenomenological determination or intra-worldly experience” (Brassier, 2001: 357).

<sup>83</sup> “The idea of the ‘Human’ implied in the Humanities - that is to say, the implicit assumptions about what constitutes the basic unit of reference for the knowing subject - has historically been the image of Man as a rational animal endowed with language. This is the humanist core of the classical ideal of ‘Man’... This is an ideal of bodily perfection which doubles up as a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values” (Braidotti, 2013: 1-2).

image,” (by manipulating the orthodox humanist conception and navigational conditions of ‘the body’) it is possible to gather traction on the present nexus of power relations that determine what bodies are or should be (and how this ‘shapes and supports the particularity of a place’). Furthermore, following Malik’s provocative construction of generic coordinates for an art that does not follow what he defines as “contemporary art,” the somatic speculations I will address collectively and procedurally generate the coordinates for what else a body can be that is not beholden to the limitations of orthodox categories.<sup>84</sup> These revised coordinates are arrived at by a distributed and multi-modal “rational enquiry” of how the contingent constructs of bodies, and the notion of embodiment, evolve and adapt to technical-environmental conditions as well as diverse corporeal self-articulations and interventions (as political acts). Which is only possible through such an enquiry’s commitment to pursuing “cognitive interests that are generated anew by breaking with past modes of understanding” (Brassier, 2015: 218). The exploration of expanded somatic forms and the collective inferential (re)modelling of bodies (and embodiment) through contemporary art, constitutes an axiomatic heresy whose work upon the body is a labour of transfiguration; of mutation. Humanism’s nucleus is not *arbitrarily* dethroned of its primary ontological status. It is *reconfigured materially and conceptually*, and it is relocated among dynamic and multi-scalar (social, technical, political, ecological, imaginary, and cosmic) ecologies of “mutual enmeshment.”

### **[Interlude] The Labour of Speculation: To Work A Concept**

The concluding sections of this chapter exemplify how this speculative reconfiguration has happened, and continues to happen, across a distributed milieu of contemporary art (a contingent, dynamic nexus of artists, artworks, discourses, theories, concepts, relations, institutions converging as an *information processing platform* we can call contemporary art), and what this speculative reconfiguration enables (as an *information processing protocol* we

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<sup>84</sup> See again Smithson’s confining “fraudulent categories.”

can call an uneven and combined heresy). Firstly, I will discuss some of the methodological approach I assembled and introduced in chapter 1. With this I can outline a way one can better understand the work of contemporary art's speculative turn, which, I argue, is a multi-modal instantiation of philosopher of science Georges Canguilhem's idea of *working concepts*:

“To work a concept is to vary its extension and comprehension, to generalize it through the incorporation of exceptional traits, to export it beyond its region of origin, to take it as a model or on the contrary to seek a model for it – to work a concept, in short, is progressively to confer upon it, through regulated transformations, the function of a form.” (Canguilhem, 1963: 452)

What Canguilhem describes here is a process by which concepts, and the knowledges they enable/produce, are recognised as embedded within and determined by discursive orthodoxies that limit their use and application, unless they are ‘worked’ as or through models. Such work is to *implement* concepts, which is to discursively and systematically render them according to models as constructed “*representations* of physical animate systems that *support* our understanding of those systems” (Schank, May, and Joshi, 2014: 147). That is, working a concept is a procedural process that revises and hones the concept as a consistent and applicable tool within a representational framework (our image of the world around us) in order to enhance (or, in a more accurate and ideologically neutral phrasing, to *transform*) our understanding of what it represents (the world around us, and *beyond us*).<sup>85</sup> Thus, we have here a view to contemporary art's work in relation to the production of concepts that serve as Brassier's “ingress to the real.” The following sections then, deal with contemporary art's procedural and distributed articulation of models with

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<sup>85</sup> “The image of the world around us, which we carry in our head, is just a model. Nobody in his head imagines all the world, government or country. He has only selected concepts, and relationships between them, and uses those to represent the realsystem” (Forrester, 1971). And, “Instead, a representation is seen as a kind of rendering – a partial representation that either abstracts from, or translates into another form, the real nature of the system or theory, or one that is capable of embodying only a portion of a system” (Morrison and Morgan, 1999: 27). In this way, models can be used as a situated technology of simulation and prediction: this is used day-to-day by humans and sundry creatures in order to navigate their immediate environments by modelling future actions.



which to refigure, reclaim, and engineer concepts. Such models are determinate in their (re)construction and implementation, yet do not fully jettison indeterminacy by locating its value in terms of the models' status as socio-cognitive "technologies of investigation" - in their determinate incorporation of representative materials they heuristically produce a space of reasons with which to test and render conceptual affordances (Morrison and Morgan, 1999: 19).<sup>86</sup> However, as we have seen, and given their representational status, "all models are wrong, but some are useful" and therefore attention must be paid to the *kinds* of models are used (see above discussion on the work of Martin and the "social effects" of models).

This methodological approach for contemporary art's combined and uneven heresy, its speculative schism, is concerned with the production and propagation of *new models*. The work of Morehshin Allahyari, Kodwo Eshun, Laruelle, and that of TTT is especially instructive for analysing its implementation through a broader milieu whose work plays a significant role in the speculative turn in contemporary art.

Eshun's 1998 publication *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* establishes much of the groundwork for such a speculative methodology. The book is concerned with a continuum of popular Black Music, opening with the phrase "[g]ood music speaks for itself" (Eshun, 1998: 00[-007]). Eshun's declaration signifies the book's labour of combating the "troglodytic homilies" of "Great British cretinism," the "giant inertia engine" of music journalism, and the mannerisms of "CultStud" where "theory always comes to Music's *rescue*." The remit of *More Brilliant* is summed up by Eshun when he notes that

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<sup>86</sup> Morrison and Morgan go on to say that models constitutively "limit the domain of abstract concepts" (20). This may seem counter-productive for a thesis and a body of work concerned with speculation, however, I argue that it is necessary. It may produce a particular domain of potentiality, but it is indeed a particular and new domain of potentiality. Without the inscription of this domain, I have suggested that the open and indeterminate "realm of potentiality and possibility" (Rogoff) has enabled cognitive inertia.

“[e]verywhere, the 'street' is considered the ground and guarantee of all reality, a compulsory logic explaining all Black Music, conveniently mishearing antisocial surrealism as social realism. Here sound is unglued from such obligations, until it eludes all social responsibility, thereby accentuating its unreality principle.” (Eshun, 1998: 00[-004])

In this instance Eshun’s invocation of “the ‘street’” is familiar as a trope in modern journalism and music discourse, yet as a “compulsory logic” it also embodies, in Laruelle’s terms, a Decisional apparatus that forecloses the conceptual affordances of Black Music by invoking a predetermined transcendental category. By forcing the logic of social realism, which has been a longstanding popular analytic for Black Music in dominant discourses, the “antisocial surrealism” and the speculative work therein is ignored.

Consequently, Eshun disregards what he suggests might be a more familiar canon for Black Music and focuses on a continuum of artists that span various genres yet share a characteristic disposition for imaginative, surreal, mystical, science-fictional, weird, experimental, and posthuman interests. Which is to say, a nexus of concerns that do not cohere with an *orthodox* conception of Black Music. This orthodox conception displays, to Eshun, a “lazy, pompous, lard-arsed, top-down dominance” that precludes the kind of labour (and care) that *More Brilliant* exemplifies in building new theories with sonic material and instead crystallises a “cultural confinement” around “fraudulent categories” (Smithson). If we consider again Martin’s “social effects” of models then we can find in the memetic distribution of such “compulsory logic” a formidable censorship and suppression of Black Music as a multitudinous artifactual intelligence that fosters diverse (unorthodox) logics.

So when Eshun scorns the orthodox faith in “comforting origins and social context” he does so in favour of excavating new concepts, terms, syntax, and theories from the sonic material he focuses upon. *More Brilliant*, before it even begins, credits Eshun as its “concept engineer,” which removes him from the milieu of authorship that brings its precogitated concepts and theories to bear on Black Music, and situates him as someone who wants to *build* and *construct*

something with this material. Whether navigating the “mixillogical” studio work of George Russell, the time travelling “psychoacoustic illusion” of Herbie Hancock, the “PhonoFictional engines” built by the Electromagnetic MCs, or the “Posthuman Rhythmatics” of Drexciya, *More Brilliant* is dedicated to amplifying Black Music’s misrepresented speculative long tail. The kaleidoscopic and dense array of surreal neologisms it presents are, as Eshun would go on to say of the proliferating sub-movements of 2017, “actually forms of life.” I will refer to *More Brilliant* again in section 1.2.3, but it is salient to mention for now that Eshun’s work here is an early instantiation of TTT’s suggestion that “the things encountered in fieldwork are allowed to dictate the terms of their own analysis – including new premises altogether for theory” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastel, 2007: 4).<sup>87</sup> In terms of TTT’s strategy of treating a thing “as heuristic” *More Brilliant* pays strict attention to following the conceptual navigation inferred by Eshun’s objects of study. The result is to embody a key element of speculation which is that of a recursive inferential self-transformation in terms of thinking: discourse is infected and mutated by the concepts, or “thoughtprobes,” at work within Eshun’s sonic material.<sup>88</sup> Eshun then translates<sup>89</sup> the posthuman, technological, remixological, and digital logics permeating a continuum of Black Music through a commensurate music discourse that works concepts through this music’s diverse models of thought, fashioned after an “unreality principle:” “the music captures you and abducts you into its world” (Eshun, 1998: A[178]). Just as Laruelle’s remonstration of Philosophy’s foundational Decision to split itself from the world in order to make it intelligible according to its own “standard” (Laruelle), “colonising” (Viveiros de Castro), or

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<sup>87</sup> “Far from needing theory’s help, music today is already... pregnant with thoughtprobes waiting to be activated, switched on, misused” (Eshun, 1998: 00[-003]).

<sup>88</sup> “material artefacts may be said to ‘emit concepts’ as radiation beams from radioactive materials, and in that sense may be subject to self-scalings, self-transformations and indeed self-abstractions” (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 236). “The conceptual and lexical arrangement that speculative thought imposes in order to make the claim outside of the cognitive basis for speculation also reorganizes the conditions and schema by which such speculative endeavours are taken” (Arvanessian and Malik, 2016: 12)

<sup>89</sup> “good translation allows foreign concepts to deform and subvert the conceptual apparatus of the translator” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014: 87). Here it is appropriate to acknowledge the voice of Viveiros de Castro as one that appears among a chorus of much louder speculative expressions throughout this thesis, yet is brought into brief focus at times in order to recognise his work’s tandem commitments to “that of establishing the conditions under which alien concepts can be ‘translated’ into our own conceptual language without having to leave the world they necessarily carry with them at the door” (Holbraad and Viveiros de Castro, 2016: n.p.). Which is to again draw attention to Whitehead’s defining quality of speculation as a *renewal* of observation – that it *mutates*

“fraudulent” (Smithson) model consists of a re-positioning of thought *among* rather than *above* the world and its conceptual affordances (O’ Sullivan, 2017: 280), Eshun’s thinking and writing is immanently modelled after the life-worlds of Black Music.

While Eshun re-inscribes bodies of work within a continuum of music and art that fashions speculative logics, concepts, and worlds, artist Morehshin Allahyari similarly “re-figures... forgotten or destroyed histories – from the ones destroyed by ISIS in 2015 to the female/queer figures from ancient Middle-Eastern mythical narratives and texts that are usually misrepresented” (Allahyari in Allahyari and Paul, 2019: n.p.). Allahyari utilises 3D scanning, rendering, and 3D printing technologies to excavate figures and stories of Middle Eastern mythologies. A project such as *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-16) works towards reconstructing artefacts that have been purposefully destroyed. Here, Allahyari recovers twelve statues from the Roman period city of Hatra and Assyrian artifacts from Nineveh by using 3D scanned data to produce new copies for display. Stored within each cloned item is a USB flash drive containing the data used to reproduce it as well as images, maps, PDF files, and videos documenting the destruction of the artefacts. In working with various archeologists, historians, and museum staff from Mosul Museum, *Material Speculation: ISIS* instantiates a political gesture of archiving and securing precarious histories that suffer under the continuous threat of terrorism and colonialism. With this last point in mind, Allahyari ultimately situated the work within an institutional archive in the Middle East to support a cultural commons of the region. This gesture was a move towards resisting the “digital colonialism” inherent in the potential free circulation and consumption of the artefacts among primarily Western institutions.

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extant modes of thinking. While Viveiros de Castro is one among many unnamed speculative thinkers that could elaborate alternative versions of this thesis, I have opted to focus on the related work of TTT as an expedient schema for acknowledging and translating concepts that are ‘emitted’ by the native ontologies of *things* that substantiates a reflexive implementation of SR’s aims (particularly those of Brassier’s concept-engineering). Further, TTT as a method in this thesis is to be taken as an acknowledgement that this work fills a methodological gap of SR philosophies, that Holbraad and his colleagues expound and also test ways in which concepts can be engineered in terms of a complicity with anonymous materials: they put into practice a form of what Negarestani proposes may be a non-correlationist art practice in his essay *Complicity with Contingency* (Negarestani, 2011) and they also exemplify my shared interest in eliding the perceived opposition between extreme materialist and rationalist positions – complicity with materials in their work evidently engineers concepts.

In this example there is an evident labour of resistance and protection for specific cultural histories. It points towards multiple scales of abstract, ideological, and physical violence and their accumulative epistemicidal function. A similar kind of labour which is at work in Eshun's diminishment of the Decisional apparatus that sanitises, and colonises, the cognitive import of Black Music. However, with Allahyari's later work, *SHE WHO SEES THE UNKNOWN* (2017 - present), her method of re-figuration adopted a more speculative mode of "activation" in addition to digital "preservation." What is sought to be "activated" is an occulted and oppressed kernel of epistemic *potentiality* that has been systematically expunged from mythical figures and images.

Through *SHE WHO SEES* Allahyari researched and accumulated various texts and imagery relating to Middle Eastern mythic figures and monstrous jinn: Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj, The Laughing Snake, Huma, and Aisha Qandisha. These resources are presented through a project website and various public talks that accompany the project's installations. The installations include 3D printed forms extrapolated from these resources as well as 3D rendered video, virtual reality, or hypertext that articulate a revised narrative around each figure. Allahyari's research highlights a nexus of colonial and patriarchal appropriation of these figures that has taken place "over 1,500 years," resulting in a misrepresentation that re-aligns their potentiality with dominant (orthodox) narratives. Allahyari notes that "Huma, for example, originally was queer or genderless, but through years of oral and written narration, these jinn have become more male" (Allahyari in Allahyari and Kuennnen, 2018: n.p.). The digital extrapolations of Allahyari's research foregrounds a means of re-figuring these narratives, informed by the affordances of media, and media economies, such as 3D printing, digital sculpting software, and 3D scanning.

With the mythical jinn figures Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj that represent the potential for spreading mischief and chaos on earth, Allahyari re-figures them as *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, a conjoined figure that highlights her re-appropriation of their narrative. With *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* (Fig. 6) for example a video is presented which records the manipulation and (re-)construction of figures using 3D modelling software: mesh skeletons and texture mapping processes are visible for the 3D models; an initially undefined pixel mass begins to take the form of a monstrous figure as more visual data is gathered and applied. The process takes place in a virtual 3D modelling space where the screen captures the manipulation of an object rotated and manipulated by movements that index the artist's hand at work on a mouse or tablet. The malleability (and thus the *potentiality*) of such myths are presented here within an economy of digital apparatuses and the individuals/agendas that operate them. With this kind of presentation and its manipulations there is a substantial realisation of Laruelle's work towards a non-aesthetics adjacent to his non-philosophy project which aims to "follow the movements of contemporary art in the most profound manner, not in order to describe the changes under the same codes, but to import these types of changes within aesthetics itself, and *to build scenarios that are themselves theoretical installations*" (Laruelle, 2012: 11, emphasis added). Allahyari finds in these mythic figures latent conceptual resources to be *worked*, which in her case requires engaged research in their cultural histories of creation, distribution, and manipulation. Working these concepts, for Allahyari, demonstrates a form of digital activism whereby myths and images are re-figured with the material affordances of digital reproduction and distribution. The result is a myth-figure that acts as a re-figured cognitive scaffold or "theoretical installation," an adapted shared narrative construct for thinking through contemporary conditions and revised concerns.

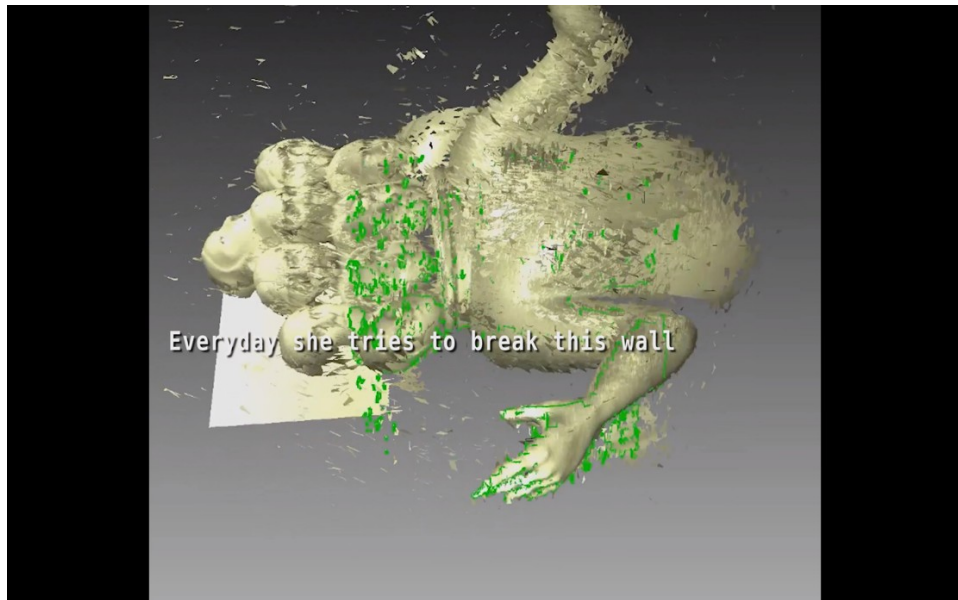


Figure 6.  
Morehshin Allahyari, 2019, *She Who Sees The Unknown: Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* (still).

While Laruelle constructs non-philosophical models of thinking by “follow[ing] the movements” (conceptual affordances) of the material itself, whether this is contemporary art or Christian mysticism or Marxism (Laruelle, 2011; 2010; 2000), Allahyari exploits<sup>90</sup> the resources embodied in Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj in order to present a timely image that emits concepts (Holbraad and Pedersen) and renders thinking with a new set of parameters: it acts as a speculative image. *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* was developed and presented during the “travel ban” that was implement by Donald Trump’s administration as a measure of U.S domestic security by restricting the travel allowances of Muslim-majority countries. Allahyari’s project produces a re-figured image that can be mapped on to her own and many others’ experiences of being controlled and marginalised as a collective ‘Other’ by a powerful authority. Using a re-figured, many-headed, and feminine mythological figure as an avatar for this collective marginalisation provides an opportunity for a contemporary archetype. Of course this is an archetype laden with the mythos

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<sup>90</sup> I use the term “exploit” following its usage in computer ‘hacking’ to denote the seeking and taking advantage of a vulnerability or flaw in a system: “a resonant flaw designed to resist, threaten, and ultimately desert the dominant political diagram” (Galloway and Thacker, 2007: 21).

of Ya'jooj and Ma'jooj whose troublesome and chaotic potentiality led to their exclusion from humanity, detained behind a wall that was said to one day crumble and lead to apocalypse.<sup>91</sup> With *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj* Allahyari presents a heretical form of agency that is seething with potentiality in the margins of orthodoxy and authority; a paradigm of thought that is occulted by the Decisional apparatus of orthodoxy and reconstructed using digital media and research as a speculative activism.

What these examples show, through their speculative labour, is an activation of artefacts for their latent conceptual potency. They substantiate Canguilhem's concern for concepts that need to be worked, to export them beyond their "region of origin," to excavate them from systemic orthodoxy that confers upon them a meaning rendered from the perspective of authority, and instead, in the cases of Eshun and Allahyari, attends to "regulated transformations" that allow for such artefacts to embody and "emit" their own epistemic frequency. So while *dOCUMENTA (13)* gathered a diverse body of artefacts in order to promote their expanded field of relations and social histories, the examples discussed here proposed instead an *active working and manipulation of these relations in order to foster their rational potential as a mode of artefactual intelligence*. Rather than augmenting one's *umwelt* to include things and relations beyond a codified humanistic view, as I argued that *dOCUMENTA (13)* has done, Eshun and Allahyari show in different ways the possibility of intervening in this *umwelt* in a more forensic manner. They work the conceptual affordances of their chosen artefacts in ways which manipulate their socio-cognitive value, actively and speculatively intervening in the conceptual possibility space that such artefacts proffer.

The work of Eshun and Allahyari draws attention to contemporary art's own version of what Laruelle refers to as "standard philosophy." While "standard philosophy" is that which works from the Decision to separate philosophy from the world and to confer upon it, from this authoritative

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<sup>91</sup> See footnote 20.



distance, a system of thinking and conceptual apparatus that belongs to itself to the exclusion of ways of thinking and conceptual affordances *native to the world*, we can say that a “standard contemporary art” is that which bolsters these orthodox modes of thinking and codifies the world accordingly. So as with Laruelle’s “non-philosophy” or “non-standard philosophy” what we find here is rather a heretical working and transmutation of concepts according to the occulted conceptual affordances of material artefacts. As things that exist within the contemporary socio-cognitive economies of Black Music or Middle Eastern mythology, they enact “transformations in the conception of reason itself” (Mackay).

### 2.2.2 Re-figuring ‘The Body,’ Re-figuring ‘The Body Politic’

Turning now to the projects *Exta* (2015) and *CHEMHEX EXTRACT* (2016)<sup>92</sup> that I curated in collaboration with curator Lucy Sames, I will outline some of contemporary art’s recent work in re-figuring the possibility space of somatic “identities [that] are available to ground [and revise] such a potent political myth called ‘us’” (Haraway, 2001: 296).<sup>93</sup> These projects started from our interests in posthuman techno-biological speculation and the myths that may accompany them, whether as some kind of future ritual or even a re-articulated “mystic fiction” such as our contemporary body-politic.<sup>94</sup> From what present or near-future conditions and materials would posthuman entities

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<sup>92</sup> See *Exta* and *CHEMHEX EXTRACT* sections of the portfolio PDF, along with relevant folders in the accompanying USB drive.

<sup>93</sup> I add “revise” here to acknowledge that with new information processing platforms (bodies) there is new information processing protocols emerging (thinking, or, even more alien processes [see again (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 210) regarding the imposition of human traits and intentionality on non- or more-than-human forms]). It is also significant to acknowledge the collaborative work of choreographer Kasia Wolinska and writer Frida Sandström who note that the “[s]ensible and careful recompositions of the self and the spaces that are shared enable collective speculations that test the social itself” which is to acknowledge the forms “community” and “togetherness” assumed and inherited and then *projected*.

<sup>94</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz’s term for the body politic, “mystic fiction” (Kantorowicz, 1997:4), is used to notify his audience of a collective “political myth” that shares a genealogy with “the collective *corpus mysticum*, the Church” (198). Our projects thus considered the future versions of collective articulation similarly tempered by residual atavisms.

and collectivities emerge? Such a question demands attention paid to contemporary issues as well as employing future-oriented speculation. The catalytic model or ‘thought-image’ we used between ourselves and in discussions with artists was that of a haruspex divining an ecstatic vision of a future collectivity from the ‘entrails’ of our Body Politic. This image was constructed as a means to facilitate thinking around the emergence of new forms from the death of old forms. I also develop and explore some of these ideas, specifically the transforming sensoria and architecture of subjecthood (the “re-orient[ation] and re-calibrat[ion of] the human mind and body to tempestuous techno-environmental conditions and moistmedia-ecologies” (Sutherland, 2016)),<sup>95</sup> in my own *Vaporents* (2016) project.

### 2.2.2a Exta

*Exta* and *CHEMHEX* explored the working of humanist conceptions of the body and the body politic in contemporary art. These projects exploited the conceptual resources of body horror and of occultism which are present in the guiding image motivating these projects: that of a haruspex divining speculative futures from the entrails of the present. In addition to these substantive affordances, the figure of the haruspex here also offers an opportunity to explore how alternative images of the future are produced: how “entrail-reading as a cultural practice... can illuminate the general logic of cultural representations, and the way in which they are constructed and processed in a cross-cultural manner” (Abbink, 1993: 723). We asked ourselves and the artists we worked with: what future subjects, what future form of sociality, might a haruspex envision from the entrails of the present? We attempt to re-think the body with a thinking body; with a form of *somatic speculation*.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Throughout my various projects and in some of the ‘mutated’ reflections in this thesis, I adopt a stylized manner of writing that is a hyperbolic combination of unusual concepts. This is done in way to conceptually and affectively map this practice on to the mystic “use” of language as articulated by Culpitt (Culpitt, 1998: 120), see section 2.3 for a full quotation in relation to the work of Jenna Sutela.

<sup>96</sup> “In one direction, mystical vision secrets the subject, unites it with the Hidden... In the other direction, mystical vision hacks open the subject, evaporates, and airs it into the limitless open of perfect, primordial actuality” (Masciandaro, 2016: 276).

While these two projects were formulated and presented as a curatorial collaboration, the following reflection is my own research, analysis, and conclusions.

Haruspicy has historically been concerned with a particular event involving a local milieu such as the outcome of a battle, an illness, a wedding, a burial, or a journey, so that an answer may be divined for a specific question and earn relevance within the formal social architecture of a community. Consequently, I view this complex arrangement as a collective and multi-modal process that involves multiple agencies in the production of a mutual divinatory experience or hallucination: the haruspex, the public address of a relevant question, the material affective contingencies of the gutted entrails, and the social context that couches and names the ritual's significance.

A history of haruspicy derived from antiquity places a singular expert, the haruspex, in the position of objectively 'reading' marks and signs in the exta of a sacrificed animal according to a set of pre-determined rules to produce results of a binary nature – yes/no. The anthropological studies of Jon Abbink that focus on entrails-reading among the present-day Me'en society in southwestern Ethiopia instead propose a *dialogical* approach. This contemporary approach is more in tune with my positioning of significant interlocutors within the divinatory ritual – the dead and thus decomposing visceral matter, the environment, the suppliant and spectators of the community and the galvanising authority figure(s) leading the ritual. (Abbink records that in Me'en readings, a domesticated animal belonging to the social make-up, a medium that belongs both to the encultured community and the 'natural' world, is sacrificed for the purposes of a collective reading process). In this case, conclusions are drawn from the ritual based upon leading (rather than binary) utterances offered to the interested party by the haruspex figure, depending on

what the entrails offer in terms of distinct colourations, marks and general condition. But meaning is arrived at through *deliberation* among the interlocutors present, rather than simply an expert translation of signs embedded in the decaying tissue.

From this rite, we can derive a fertile ground upon which to constitute the formal composition of *Extā* as a *public entrail-reading-ritual*: the art exhibition here as an existing cultural ritual that elicits behaviours and tropes as a situated communication to an audience, positioning *Extā* as a site of the “public-divinatory type” of reading. (Abbink differentiates this type from the “oracular type” which is described as a more private, short-term prophecy based on the interrogation of events specific to individuals and families rather than larger communities (Abbink, 1993: 711)). As detailed by Abbink, this type of reading offers a ritual catalysed, motivated, and led by communal dialogue. *Extā* and *CHEMHEX*, then, posits the artworks as intensive indexes of cultural interests – embodiments and explorations of particular social preoccupations. Which is to say that they function as socio-cognitive technologies.

*Extā* and *CHEMHEX* were explicitly introduced as a particular type of reading-ritual, beginning to formulate a question with which to address an audience. Abbink goes on to describe the public divinatory types of entrail-reading, referring particularly to extant burial ceremonies of community members, which

“allows people (like neighbours or respected community elders) to transmit and summarize ideas, opinions or feelings about the state of affairs with regard to the group to which the dead person belonged... [and] allows predictions about the future circumstances of the relatives, the deceased’s offspring and the area in which he/she lived.” (Abbink, 1993: 715)

As stated, these projects aimed to begin operating on the corpse of the body politic, to reveal speculative visions about future bodies and their environmental collisions, corruptions and conditions.<sup>97</sup> What does a future

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<sup>97</sup> Maridien Schneider’s book ‘Cicero ‘Haruspex’: Political Prognostication and the

populace look like when immanently birthed from the *exta* of the present, rather than inferred as a futuristic imagination based on the normative orthorexia of transhumanism?<sup>98</sup> Our projects aimed to conjure an answer in the form of ecstatic visions of posthumanist variations of the body: a “long tail of (human) bodily difference” (Crespo, 2015) that revises the humanist ideal of the body politic. Specifically, a vision as a mode of speculation motivated by a vector of decay where the “grave is an oasis” (Cioran quoted in Shipley, 2015) payed attention to artworks that conjured images of future bodies rendered as imperfect entities entangled among and constantly negotiating with the contingencies of techno-environmental conditions. These projects were particularly interested in how this enmeshment and ongoing negotiation is productive of evolutionary corruptions that profane the powerfully safeguarded ideal of what is *meant* to be human, with the differentially and hopefully en-monstered.<sup>99</sup> These variations questioned the very idea that the human is indeed a self-evident category, that it is a revisable and precarious construct enmeshed among a dynamic field of relations.

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Viscera of a Deceased Body Politic’ (2013) traces Cicero’s methodology and practice as a political commentator, comparing his forecasting to that of a *haruspex* operating on a deceased body-politic. My interest in this, with regard to the elaboration of a public-divinatory reading ritual, is related to Cicero’s pronouncement that divination as a political tool and technology needed to be developed for the “sake of the republic.”

<sup>98</sup> Posthumanism is an exploration of *how* humans are contingently co-constituted by environmental and technical conditions, and an exploration of *how* this more-than-human evolution might be steered according to a relevant “posthuman ethics” that builds on the revision of perennial categories such as the self, whereas transhumanism is tethered to an ethics of “self-enhancement” that, although is committed to exploring the efficacy of new technologies for accelerating and intervening in the evolution of the human, retains a fidelity to the “constitutive metaphysical oppositions of humanism” (Wolfendale, 2015). Furthermore, with this metaphysical attachment comes an inherited belief in a singular and universal modality of progress rather than contingent non-linear mutation, which *Extā* explored. I also consider this difference when articulating the speculative potential of socio-cognitive technologies as scaffolding: that they do not inherently imply a modality of *progress* or *improvement* which sits within a narrow bandwidth of what thinking, or indeed the human, *can be*.

<sup>99</sup> “I [use] the term ‘hopeful monster’ to express the idea that mutants producing monstrosities may have played a considerable role in macroevolution. A monstrosity appearing in a single genetic step might permit the occupation of a new environmental niche and thus produce a new type in one step” (Goldschmidt 1940: 390).

A number of the artworks of these projects elaborated upon this kind of speculative teratology<sup>100</sup> with corrupt glimpses of a monstrous future socius and its re-/de-forming multitude of bodies:

The idea of the human becomes a smooth gradient of different worms, flies, wasps, plants and fungi. The toad, the miasma, the sludge and the human all become part of a differential field wherein each entity can gradually unfold into another regardless of the congruity of their traits, environments and habits (Negarestani, 2010: 413)

The language here demonstrates our understanding of the fate of the so-called body politic, and it's modular citizenry of *individuals*. Expanding on Cicero's method of "going through the motions of a haruspex, inspecting the entrails of the corpse politic of the *res publica*," (Schneider 2013: 203), *Extā* and *CHEMHEX* follow and imagine the formal implications of such a (symbolic) decomposition. Less like the body of an 'artificial man,' structured according to the idealised image of an "*a priori* or "natural" body... in which (material and moral) integrity is both the original and perfect condition, and the necessary condition for the continued well-being of the members and of itself" (Sullivan 2005: 328) and more like a monstrous re-figuration along the lines of the DC Comics character, Swamp Thing: an entity ontologically perforated by, somatically corrupted by, and acting in convergence with the non-human contingencies of its environment. The traditional myth of the wholesome body politic is rendered dead, re-formed as a decaying corpse, a "fibroproliferative mess" with an inherently nebulous structure; perforated and confused boundaries (Negarestani, 2008: 67).<sup>101</sup> It is more in tune with the

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<sup>100</sup> Braidotti argues that the figure of the monster acts as an unstable and shifting site of semantic reconfiguration: "it is in the language of monstrosity that difference is often translated" (Braidotti, 2002: 175). This is key also to Allahyari's use of monstrous figures as embodiments of feminine and queer positions.

<sup>101</sup> Negarestani's "negative building vectors of decay" (Negarestani, 2010: 387) are helpful in considering the organic possibilities that emerge from decomposition of another form. See also my *Whale Fall* project in the accompanying portfolio as a continuation of this logic.

topology of a swamp, with its muddled thresholds between land and water, and sundry creatures evolved to traverse and dwell in such an environment.

The long tail of re-figured bodies<sup>102</sup> that constituted *Exta* and *CHEMHEX* included Eva Papamargariti's self-aware virtual avatars aggregated from digital models, Joey Holder's experimental military robotics emulating the movements of snakes, Lewis Den Hertog's paranoid-delusional teddy bears which embody a nexus of contemporary pathologies and commonplace structural hostilities inscribed within online subcultures, Plastique Fantastique's ritual invocation of a chimeric macromutation: the Bi-Son Oil-Man, and Gary J. Shipley's description of a damned and heretic community, a septic multitude solemnly referred to as "the fucked" (Shipley, 2015).

Shipley's film essay, which featured in *Exta*, outlined this community as an invisible multitude that desecrate and "re-consecrate," or re-figure, their flesh through unorthodox unions with God; as "Mystics [that] desecrate their own graves, the grave of human form" (Shipley, 2015). "[T]he fucked" echoes at once the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fortean researcher Charles Fort's own invocation of anomalous phenomena and "data that Science has excluded" as "the damned" (Fort, 2001: 1) as well as Allahyari's occulted multitude of *Ya'jooj Ma'jooj*, suggesting a continuum of heretic subjects determined by the Decisional apparatuses of orthodox authority.<sup>103</sup> *Exta* and *CHEMHEX* situated a long tail of bodily speculative reclamation and re-consecrations of the category of 'human' among this continuum and as a re-figuration of 'community' as a "fibroproliferative mess" entangled among a nexus of

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<sup>102</sup> "You will remake my name and image / Of a thousand bodies borne by days away" (Pozzi quoted in de Certeau, 1992: 296).

<sup>103</sup> We can also find a significant resonance with the category of the "Poor image" as defined by Hito Steyerl in her suggestion that "Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen" (Steyerl, 2012: 32). Steyerl's Poor image refers to the circulating digital copies of images that embody a loss of fidelity to an "original," embodying a corrupt quality. Similarly, the circulation of concepts outwith the strict purview of authority are corrupted by their re-use.

technological and ecological contingencies; Othered by the orthodoxy of humanism. We proposed that “other ways of subjectivizing ourselves in new formulations of ‘togetherness’” appear not just as humanist variations of discrete citizen-subjects separate from the world and living ‘together’ in communal harmony, but rather as a constant negotiation between material conditions and shifting orthodoxies. For our imagined haruspex,

“organs cease being silent and emit disturbing noises. Mystic phenomena give form to these insane noises come from elsewhere (is it the angel, is it the devil?) and perceived as questions or threats for the consciousness that the social body has of itself” (de Certeau, 2015: 7).

### 2.2.2b Vaporents

While *Extā* and *CHEMHEX* were a commitment to divining the contingent mutations substantiating a long tail of human bodily difference and somatechnic potentiality,<sup>104</sup> *Vaporents*<sup>105</sup> highlighted the speculative and navigational resources of what is referred to as a digital native:

“A dank enlightenment is gaming your bones. What do you do?”

*Vaporents* is a multi-reality biome; a post-digital swampscape of bacterial gameworlds, ambient trans-architectures, genetic dreampunk fictions, labyrinthine nanobot industrial-complexes, dirty wifi, and interfaces-interfaces-interfaces- interfaces...

With the delirious logic of a lucid dream or a psychedelic vision, *Vaporents* explores the speculative navigational resources required of digital natives immersed in the hypercontextual virtualities of a post-continuous present. The transversal experience of negotiating the dynamic gamespaces of post-digital culture demands a user-erotics of speculation, simulation, puzzle-solving, ceaseless intuition of occult algorithms... All of which perpetually re-orient and

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<sup>104</sup> Somatechnics is a term coined by Gender and Women’s Studies theorist, Susan Stryker, and colleagues, during discussions occasioned by ‘Body Modification’ conferences at Macquarie University, and highlights the inextricability of the *soma* (body) and *technē* (craftsmanship), suggesting a discourse on the political, ideological and ethical implications of bodies that are necessarily forms that negotiate, and re-negotiated with technical environmental conditions and material.

<sup>105</sup> See *Vaporents* section of portfolio PDF and the relevant folder of material provided in the USB drive.



re-calibrate the human mind and body to tempestuous techno-environmental conditions and moistmedia-ecologies. From the mannerisms of intimacy that bind and connect us, to the subsequent capacity to dream, design, and enter into projects of collective rationality through digitally altered states. “ (Sutherland, 2016)

Two exhibitions provide a possible genealogy for *Vaporents*: *Les Immatériaux* curated by François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput at the Centre Pompidou in 1985, and, *Ariadne's Gone Virtual* by 0(rphan>) d(rift>) at Underwood Street Gallery in 1995. These exhibitions, as well as *Vaporents*, enact what Lyotard referred to as a “dramaturgy of information,” in the sense of producing an immersive environment that formally dramatises concepts rather than illustrating or depicting them alone. This method of curating chimes with the aforementioned SR-derived neorationalist mode of gaining purchase upon the ‘real’ by conceptual navigation. What both of these exhibitions do, as progenitors, is provide an understanding of the exhibition space as a medium through which one physically and psychologically navigates a complex, non-linear environment designed to disorientate the user/viewer/spectator for specific reasons. In the case of *Les Immatériaux*, this was done in order to present a labyrinthine structure (with an audio ‘guide’ comprised of extracts from Maurice Blanchot, Antonin Artaud, various pieces of music, etc. which did not elucidate any ‘correct’ pathway or narrative for the exhibition) through which individuals would come to recognise the nature of the ‘new materials’ Lyotard proposed as re-orienting life in the technologically-mediated world. These materials were not ‘immaterial’, as a direct translation of the title might suggest, but rather another substrate of materiality that is native to an informatic or cybernetic social environment.

*Ariadne's Gone Virtual* developed this mode as a comparable “dark maze of video, physical and textual objects:”

“A labyrinth or network of paths - image/text/sound fusion. Orphan Drift> is building a labyrinth which is inside out, or without walls. It is composed of surfaces; video, material fabrics, and objects (or navigational tools) which make up spaces, or zones. In these zone stories are told through images and sound, and the stories, like us, move through different states. These stories are

of the interface adaption - danger circuit that is our lives. This is a nervous network, a schizoid novel visualized - made experiential.” (0(rphan>) d(rift>))

The aim here, was to similarly entangle the exhibition user/visitor within a dramaturgical experience reflective of then newly-available domestic technologies which opened up virtual, cybernetic spaces of interaction, and attendant reformulations of subjectivity which were then being considered as native to these spaces. 0(rphan>) d(rift>)’s and Lyotard’s recognition of virtual spaces and worlds as materially augmenting and altering reality is highlighted in 0(rphan>) d(rift>)’s suggestion of an aesthetic “evolutionary strategy” of “everting the virtual:” an adaptive mechanism for navigating and traversing “a new kind of environment” (Roberts, 2016: n.p.).

These exhibitions are touchstones for my own attempt to elaborate such a dramaturgy of the experiential architecture of contemporary digital culture and the concomitant *speculative subjectivity* of digital natives. Specifically, in establishing the psychological conditions, environmental affordances, and *transcorporeal* resources with which such subjects might act speculatively.<sup>106</sup> Given my previous outlining of how users/subjects are embedded, or networked, as media within cognitive loops comprised of externalised material, and within infrastructural mechanisms that, as totalities distributed beyond human scales of perception (and thus operate indifferently to the needs and desires of humans), *Vaporents* concerns itself with the unarticulated possibilities and demands of this subjective re-positioning<sup>107</sup> rather than becoming mired in the pathos of existential demotion that would impede a

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<sup>106</sup> “we can foster the sense of enfolding, in which the “outside” is always already within, inhabiting and transforming what may or may not be still “human” through continual intra-actions. In this dynamic scenario, matter— nature, if you will—is always an agent of change and always already within and without the permeable membrane of the human. This sense of trans-corporeality may best be understood as posthuman in that material agencies reconfigure the very boundaries of the human as such” (Alaimo, 2010: 154).

<sup>107</sup> “...players not only play the game but are also played by the game, disciplined by the game’s logic into an identification made more intense by the kinaesthetic and embodied aspects of game play” (Hayles, 1999: 315).

strictly humanist form of thinking. That there might be a form of reason native to these conditions of subjectivity.

The environment taken to be presently given by *Vaporents* is the “codification of the everyday as ‘ambient’ media, a background hum to which we are acclimatised and accustomed, in which we live and breathe, and into which ‘digital natives’ are born” (Coley and Lockwood, 2012: 50). And that the topology of this climate of ambient media is a gamespace, nesting multiple and parallel “natural-seeming gameworlds” (60). This is to inhabit a cybernetic environment that instantiates a ‘third-order cybernetics,’ wherein computational circuitries and media are engrained in cognitive and affective loops of human subjects, constituting a “mixed, augmented and increasingly complex reality, [where] we find ourselves in dynamic relation with multiple time/spaces, dipping in and out of pervasive data streams, adapting to subtle systemic shifts” (35). Thus, the cognitive-affective condition of anticipation within third-order subjects, or digital natives, is exploitable as a means of generating value. If the mechanisms of anticipation are open to colonisation by third-order market forces, then does this manipulation engender a kind of speculative foreclosure? ‘How one might dream the future through a hybrid machine-vision’, is one of the questions I posed to artists in approaching them to produce new work for *Vaporents*.

So this multi-world, multi-future environment is the navigable field I intended to highlight as the seedbed for posthuman techno-environmental chimeric subjectivities, and their attendant psychedelic modes of orientation.<sup>108</sup> The title of the exhibition is, then, meant to obliquely, speculatively, name these subjects. Borrowing the term ‘vapor’ from vaporware and its construction of pre-emptive futures that will not exist as promised, yet recursively

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<sup>108</sup> “Psychedelia implies a transformation of human subjectivity towards the post-human, and opens up a conception of the machine as something that should be articulated in complementary, rather than antagonistic terms to what is human” (Larsen, 2013: n.p.).

extrapolate another future scenario,<sup>109</sup> and also from the online music sub-genre ‘vaporwave’ which through a hypnagogic, hazy sound engenders a similar kind of “chronosickness” (Williams, 2013: n.p.) in terms of mixing images of a cyberpunk future with samples remixed from 80s and 90s nostalgia. While ‘ents’ refers to a fictional race of beings described by J. R. R. Tolkien, aligning the nature of digital natives with that of the strange beings of speculative fiction.

The kind of speculative subjectivity is posited, in the context of *Vaporents*, as being always *in media res* as per the transmedia imperative to break with linear narrative form as a mode of parsing information (and reality), and thus in a temporal state of *disorientation*. Disorientation, as a state pregnant with the possibilities of immanently new forms of bodily and conscious experience, can be unpacked with reference to Steigler’s account of “epiphylogenesis,” or the co-evolution between human and technological environs that has a de-contextualizing effect:

“it *disorients* them by undermining the singularity of their here and now while simultaneously endowing them with a different kind of existence. As paradoxical as it may seem, disorientation thus lands human beings in a new place. It spatializes them in accordance with disorientation’s own coordinates” (Rebedeva, 2009: 82).

Consequently, disorientation as a speculative opportunity was yet another theme that I broached with the artists I invited to participate in the exhibition. In describing the post-digital imbrication of dry silicon-technology and wet-biologies<sup>110</sup> as a swampscape (see chapter 3) that can be navigated by a “productive conceptual vertigo,” (Willis, 2016: n.p.) the artists and I discussed producing an exhibition that dramatised disorientation as a form of orientation within such an environment; a form of subjective grounding for a speculative subject.

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<sup>109</sup> Vaporware is commonly known as a product that is promised for a future release but never materialises.

<sup>110</sup> See Ascott’s articulation of “moistmedia” in (Ascott, 2001).

## 2.3 The Invention of a (Strange) Science (part 1)

I will conclude this chapter with my own fitting elaboration of a heretical systematisation of knowledge at work through my projects and the speculative milieux and ecologies they indicate. While the aforementioned 14<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial, *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms* curated by Christov-Bakargiev, attempted to combine art with “other knowledges” (Christov-Bakargiev, 2015: XLIII)<sup>111</sup> by platforming an array of occulted and unorthodox systems of knowledge in a kind of cabinet of curiosities style. In this final section I will outline an ‘other knowledge’ system that emerges from art itself, particularly that which has motivated the speculative turn. As I have been arguing, the work of the speculative turn has been towards the advancement of a lexicon of re-figured and worked concepts and images as cognitive scaffolding for thinking anew, for further speculation: the Overton window is breached with these tools and their rational operation.

Insofar as this thesis has reviewed and analysed various philosophical-artistic materials that have allowed me to deliver a singular definition of the speculative turn as a broadly instituted mode of praxis, the research and experimentation herein allows me to construct and implement my own form of (heretical) conceptual scaffolding. The ‘working’ of concepts practiced by Eshun (concept-engineering) and Allahyari (re-figuring), and experimented with by me through my own projects, both illustrates the kind of *speculative* conceptual schematisation that Brassier has insisted upon in terms of “forg[ing] the explanatory bridge from thought to being,” that is, to inculcate thinking with the conceptual affordances and contingencies of diverse yet specific materials. This is where work such as Eshun’s and Allahyari’s illustrates a mode of *implicit* anti-correlationism in terms of forging a “complicity” (Negarestani, 2011: 11) with the anonymous contingencies of materials (sonic, digital, mythological, conceptual, haptic), and therefore with the ontological order of *things* exemplified in the work of TTT, betraying orthodox or common-sense humanist hierarchies and modes of understanding.

As mentioned in Section 1.1, some of the work of this thesis has been in

the formation of a specialised assemblage or toolbox that *puts to use* the proposals and implications surrounding the speculative critique of correlationism. *How* I have put this material to use will be introduced via the below discussion on de Certeau's *mystics*, and illustrated in the final chapter: the toolbox assembled via this engagement is one that drives the conceptual work of my ongoing project Most Dismal Swamp (Chapter 3). Such is also the case with the instructive work of TTT and the thinkers who have nurtured this anthropology-based methodology: it is the *methodological* crux of TTT which has been analysed and implemented as a means of properly considering extant yet under-analysed speculative work (Eshun, Allahyari...), and of forging my own novel yet methodologically resonant speculative art/curatorial practice.

The *Exta* and *CHEMHEX* projects exemplified a steadily growing interest across contemporary art in mysticism, occultism, magic, shamanism, ritual, witchcraft, and even more esoteric fringe practices such as tulpamancy. Among a vast profusion of events and publications demonstrating this uptake include, for example, Spike Art Magazine's Winter 2019 issue dedicated to exploring these "esoteric, cybernetic, psychedelic, technoshamanic worlds," as well Impakt Festival's 2017 iteration curated by Haunted Machines, *Haunted Machines & Wicked Problems*, which, through three exhibitions and a four-day symposium, addressed "the relationship between technology, religion, magic and the occult... how in magic, the spectacle is used to hide technical processes; in myth, how we build stories and narratives to culturally assimilate

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<sup>111</sup> Such "other knowledges" and much of what I have referred to, along with the forthcoming discussion on de Certeau's *mystics*, is akin to the "subjugated knowledges" of Michel Foucault whose alterity are an active substantiation of expressing resistance to established norms by fostering alternative forms (Foucault, 1980: 81).

complex technologies; and how we use monsters to think about when things go wrong.” The exhibition *AGENCY* curated by James Bridle at NOME Gallery, Berlin, is instructive in considering this esoteric turn, in Bridle’s articulation of the significance of “mythology [as] the constant retelling of old stories under the conditions of the present” (Bridle in Shipwright, 2018: n.p.).

While I acknowledge that this vast profusion of activity (which has even recently been referred to as “the ritual turn”) merits attention and analysis in its own right and as such would (and undoubtedly will) necessitate numerous further Ph.D. projects, my aim here is not to locate it as a distinct genre for consideration. Instead, I argue that this kind of activity is significant as a branch of contemporary art’s *parallel distributed processing* power: a cognitive assemblage is furnished with the experimental images, protocols, navigational tools, materials, concepts, axiomatic principles, and models of these mystic knowledges as a means to think otherwise and to tether this thinking with that which is deemed as *heresy*. That is, the work of the speculative turn is best considered as the “invent[ion of] speculative sciences at the intersection of arts, humanities and sciences” (Blackman).<sup>112</sup> And this ‘invention of sciences,’ as with Laruelle’s construction of other modes of thinking *with* the material historically taken as *distinct* from thinking (as per the *a priori* Decisional of Philosophy), is heretically constituted by what we choose to be our “alembics and cucurbits” as socio-cognitive resources, whether this be manmade artefacts or biotic processes:

“...humans are better off appealing to nonhumans. Endowed with their new semiotic powers, the latter contribute to a new form of text, the experimental scientific article, a hybrid between the age-old style of biblical exegesis -

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<sup>112</sup> This kind of cross-contamination among disciplines with a disregard for professional boundaries reminds us once more of Laruelle’s suggestion that “only heretics have both philosophy and religion, philosophy and science together at their disposal” (Laruelle, 2012: 284). And, furthermore, of Roger Caillois’ “new plea for a diagonal science... [which would] seek to make out the single legislation uniting scattered and seemingly unrelated phenomena. Slicing obliquely through our commonworld, they decipher latent complicities and reveal neglected correlations” (Caillois, 2003).

which was previously applied only to the Scriptures and classical texts - and the new instrument that produces new inscriptions.” (Latour, 1997: 23)

Occultism and mysticism, as with Latour’s hybrid of traditional “exegesis” and “experimental... new inscriptions,” represent here a reconfiguration of an orthodox concept space with the dark matter of that very orthodoxy; a kind of return of orthodoxy’s repressed.<sup>113</sup> In Latour’s examples he expands on the potential agencies and inscriptive capacities of nonhuman actants that work as much as humans within the networks of scientific discovery, discourse, and representation.

I have already alluded to Eshun’s invention, of such sciences, through working the occulted conceptual affordances and speculative value of Black Music, where “music’s mystifying illogicality is not chastised but *systematized* and intensified - into MythSciences that burst the edge of improbability, incites a proliferating series of mixillogical mathemagics at once maddening and perplexing, alarming, alluring” (Eshun, 1998: 00[-004], emphasis added). And also Fort’s invocation of anomalous data in order to forge “[a] procession of the damned. By the damned, I mean the excluded. We shall have a procession of data that Science has excluded.” But what kind of science is (re-)figured through the kind of contemporary art I have discussed? Given the features and functions I have focused on thus far, from Allahyari’s instructive practice of re-figuration to my own project’s articulation of speculative subjectivities, I argue that the work of the speculative turn is best considered as a contemporary articulation of de Certeau’s conception of *mystics* (as a “new” or “strange science” (de Certeau, 1992: 11; de Certeau, 2015: 3)). Contrary to the axiomatic openness and indeterminacy of the long nineties that buttressed an orthodox nexus of liberal humanism, *mystics* articulates a suite of resources as a cognitive scaffold with which to re-figure such orthodoxies and to explore the

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<sup>113</sup> “Indeed, ‘mystical words,’ in having a secret referent, are not engaged in the entire set of seductions or manipulations generated by the hidden; they are themselves caught up in the labyrinthian relations of the fictions they produce with the realities they reveal” (de Certeau, 1992: 98); “The hidden begins to take on the aspect of a plot” (de Certeau, 1992: 97).



“rearticulation, the reconfiguration, of what [the given] might be” (Beech, Canini, Fisher, Grant, and Mackay, 2010: n.p.).

A translator’s note in the first volume of de Certeau’s *The Mystic Fable* provides some clarification of the term *mystics* and my use of it here:

“The theme of Michel de Certeau’s *Mystic Fable* is *la mystique*. This term cannot be rendered accurately by the English word “mysticism,” which would correspond rather to the French *le mysticisme*, and be far too generic and essentialist a term to convey the historical specificity of the subject of this study. There is no need here to retrace the steps by which *la mystique*, the noun, emerged from the prior adjective, *mystique* ..... But it may be of some interest to note that this grammatical promotion has its parallel in English, in the development of such terms as “mathematics” or “physics,” fields of inquiry of increasing autonomy, also taking their names from an adjectival forerunner. I have, therefore, *in extremis*, adopted the bold solution of introducing a made-up English term, *mystics* ..... to render *la mystique*, a field that might have won (but never did, in English) a name alongside metaphysics, say, or optics.” (Smith in de Certeau, 1992: ix-x)<sup>114</sup>

To situate the work of the speculative turn within a continuum of *mystics* is to involve it in a tradition of heresy: a distributed social *practice*, as de Certeau emphasises, that corrupts and reforms doctrinal orthodoxy; *mystics*<sup>115</sup> “subvert their religions’ local knowledge and practices” (Kripal, 2004: 489). This is also not the “scientific assimilation” or “colonizing” (de Certeau, 2015: 14) of *mystics* but rather a tracing and mapping of its logics, its “mystic operations” (21) with regards to the work of the speculative turn. With *mystics* there is an opportunity for the practical elaboration of a science, a shared body of work or enterprise wherein images and concepts are shared, worked and tested (108), yet in a manner motivated by an axiomatic heresy: *mystics* is a religiosity founded on “a new articulation set out by the same symbols” (Ibid.).<sup>116</sup> “*The*

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<sup>114</sup> “...and it tends to define the status of a discourse or a science in its own right that will be referred to by a new noun, *la mystique* [*mystics*]” (de Certeau, 2015: 112).

<sup>115</sup> *Mystics* concerns “the function of persons or groups who defy a church its authority in doctrinal matters, but claim to bear witness to the true spirit in separating themselves from corrupt institutions” (de Certeau, 2015: 20).

<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, I do not situate all contemporary work that makes reference to mystical, occult, or magical forms in this category of *mystics*. For example, there are those which ostensibly render a fidelity to such ‘other knowledges’ yet are axiomatically opposed to the deviation from orthodox inheritance in the production of a “mystic language” as *mystics*

*book increasingly replaces institutions*, considered as being decadent or corrupt” (122, original emphasis) and works against the perceived static orthodoxy of the church by creating, through newly transmissible forms such as the novel with its “*vulgar tongues*” (123) in place of ecclesiastical latin. Such texts form a network spanning generations and traversing geographies for a discourse to take root<sup>117</sup> within this “theatre [which] is transportable, manipulable, and available for all sorts of intellectual or phantasmagorical operations. Everyone thus has a laboratory for experimentation” (Ibid.). Not only do such heresies find a more expedient mode of propagation but, as with Latour’s “new form of text, the experimental scientific article” their re-worked images and concepts form the scaffolding which “facilitates more complex possibilities of signs, and, in particular it gives more flexibility to the relations between “ideas.”” Again: the Overton window is breached with these tools and their rational operation, via the work of *mystics*.

The economy of *mystics* entails a *discursive*, which is to say a *rational*, flourishing of practices: a distributive artifactual intelligence, comprised of “fables” and experimental texts, that re-figures not only the body of the mystic herself<sup>118</sup> but the very idea of a “body of doctrines” held in place by ecclesiastical authority. With its worked and working concepts it fosters a “language of movement [which] implies a continual transgression of fixed points” re-figuring Christianity as “a journey, a practice or action” (Sheldrake,

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constitutively demonstrates. These are practices that I would name with the term *mystic fundamentalism* which is to say that they operate as an index of what mystic, occult, or magical practices are *supposed* to look like rather than constructing a contemporary cognitive scaffolding that continues the speculative work of their forebears and puts to work the conceptual resources of the material.

<sup>117</sup> “The datum is buried: it may sprout some day” (Fort)

<sup>118</sup> Referring to the divine experiences of the 17th Century Christian mystic Jane Lead, whose path to divine union was characterised by illness, Francis Lee writes that, “the whole constitution of her body had been for some time before entirely infected and corrupted so that she compared it to a rotten sack... She was even wont to say that all that was put into it was just as if it had been thrown into a filthy receptacle, and that there was in her body a continual springing up of corrupt matter, which it was impossible to get rid of or entirely exhaust” (1704: MSS C.5.30). Her somatic corruptions are likened to a fetid wellspring of thought, comparable to the fecund entrails examined in *Extā*.

2001: 40). New images and concepts are hypothesised through revising that which is inherited by way of “[t]he crafts and science of the times enter[ing] mystic language” (de Certeau, 2015: 110). Which is to say that, in the case of the work studied by de Certeau, that such bodies of doctrines are re-figured by the procedures of a “diagonal science” (Callois). Rather than deferring to a fixed higher authority these procedures, or “mystic operations,” combine the significance of subjective experience, private reflection, social discursive mediation of ideas, and the material conditions of new media: “only heretics have both philosophy and religion, philosophy and science together at their disposal” (Laruelle, 2012: 284).<sup>119</sup>

As with Allahyari’s fashioning of narratives for Middle Eastern myth-figures from personal experience, contemporary political concerns, and oppressed voices, or Eshun’s midwifery of Black Music’s latent “mathemagics,” or Laruelle’s construction of multiple “philo-fictions” as a replacement thought-model for that of Philosophy’s singular Decisional framework, *mystics* operates by way of a *use* of tradition and its conceptual resources in the organised fabulation of “fictive discourses in a rigorous theatre” of (worked) concepts. In other words, *mystics* is the speculative modelisation and working of concepts that makes vital use of “privileged spaces” outwith the fixed coordinates of orthodoxy.<sup>120</sup> New coordinates are not simply produced through arbitrary fancy but through the mode of abductive inference “which uses a multimodal and synthetic form of reasoning to dynamically expand its capacities” (Negarestani, 2014: 436). Burrows and

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<sup>119</sup> “[T]he mystic conception aims to emancipate the reader-subject and to credit him with an existence if his own, detached from any subjugation or conformity to the book” (de Certeau, 2015: 121).

<sup>120</sup> “While the overall location or ‘site’ of mystic literature in this period should not be oversimplified, Michel de Certeau suggested that there were “privileged spaces for the development of mystical insight and practice, not least within certain social categories. De Certeau noted that mysticism seemed to be closely related to forms of instability or social disinheritance” (Sheldrake, 2001:42; de Certeau, 2000; 191). I suggested in footnote 36 that contemporary iterations of these “privileged spaces” exist in the form of discursive sites such as para-academic organisations, artist-run gallery networks, *subrosa* chat servers, and even nightclubs or illegal raves and soundsystems (see Braw and Gamble, 2017). It is these kinds of spaces that have consistently enabled my own curatorial work.

O' Sullivan expand on this with the thought that “abduction involves an experimental attitude, but also a pragmatic modelling of different realities which proceeds through, imagining and imaging, performing and making, alongside more abstract reasoning” (Burrows and O' Sullivan, 2019: 349).

My invocation of *mystics* here functions as a model with which I can map the activity of contemporary art in terms of its “invent[ion] of speculative sciences” and also as a substantiation of what Deleuze would call a “deterritorialization of a major language” (O' Sullivan, 2005). That is, the *use* of given codes and semiotics towards, a “stammering and stuttering of language, a making strange of typical signifying regimes” towards a productive *reterritorialisation* of language.<sup>121</sup> What *mystics* provides for this conceptualisation of “minor literature” is a suite of conceptual and genealogical resources with which to delineate a contemporary iteration of these operations that is consistent with the art of the speculative turn. That from the confines of orthodoxy comes a “universal and teratological language” (de Certeau, 1992: 66) with which to think; to renew thinking; to speculate. Furthermore, this articulation of such a minor language is shared across, even *enabled by*, the relationships between *mystics* and the orthodoxies of the church; between para-academia and academia (e.g the aforementioned genre of theory-fiction); and the experimental spaces/economies in which my own projects have found a foothold among others' work rather than the galleries, museums, and biennials that have broadly thematised concepts rather than heretically *worked* them. Therefore, ‘curating a heresy’ is indeed something that demonstratively happens around the peripheries of the institutional art world: in the minor worlds of more ephemeral and precarious project spaces, social media accounts, websites, and parasitical communities of practice. In terms of how this idea relates to that of the ‘swamp’, see Chapter 3.

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<sup>121</sup> “This writing style is a permanent exercise in transposition: it therefore gives precedence to word usage over received definitions” (de Certeau, 1992: 118).

Like the “diagonal science” of *mystics* that traverses and uses tradition (*working* its concepts), personal experience, emerging philosophies and sciences, poetry, the “vulgar tongues” of non-experts and other such heresies, the work of artist Jenna Sutela, specifically the paired *nimiia vibié* and *nimiia cétiï* projects, brings together diverse resources in the fabulation of such a “teratological language.”

Don Cupitt, who discusses the salience of mysticism as a parallel modern science, argues

“The reason why mystics use language in the strange ways they do is twofold: on the one hand, they are trying to play games with language in such a way as to destabilize structures of religious oppression that are firmly built into language. . . If a mystic’s writing sometimes appears far-fetched or fanciful, the reason is not that he or she is a soulful eccentric with idiosyncratic ideas about heavenly matters, but rather that religious utterance is surrounded by very severe pressures and threats of a political kind.” (Cupitt, 1998: 120)

And so it is with *nimiia vibié* and *nimiia cétii* where we are introduced to a “more-than-human language”<sup>122</sup> brought together through various sources: it embodies a “turn to the exegesis of “wild” voices”” (de Certeau, 1995: 85). Sutela’s project substantiates my own suggestion for the reformulation of Haraway’s dream “not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (Haraway, 2001: 316) according to the conjunctive logic I specified in chapter 1: as *a common language-and-infidel heteroglossia*; a rational schematisation of and with the immanent conceptual expressions of speculation; a realisation of Beech’s aforementioned “construction of another language.” *nimiia cétii* (2018) and *nimiia vibié* (2019) (a video work and a record release via the electronic music label PAN, respectively) form this teratological language, via the use of a sophisticated neural network, from diverse resources and data. Sutela invokes the work of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century medium Hélène Smith whose séances, she claimed, granted visionary access to Martian societies where she recorded their gestural and vocal utterances via acts of automatic writing which at the time had gained interest among spiritualist and proto-surrealist work. Smith’s ‘Martian’ vocabulary was recorded using Sutela’s voice to produce a dataset of ‘words’ for a Machine Learning algorithm developed by Google.<sup>123</sup> A further dataset that was produced involved the recorded microscopic movements of *Bacillus subtilis* which is a bacterium hypothesised to have arrived on Earth from outer space or even Mars. This bacterium is used as a primary ingredient in *natt*, or fermented soybeans, and is also used in space exploration as an ‘extremophile’ organism that has survived in space and on Mars expeditions.<sup>124</sup> The computer

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<sup>122</sup> Available at: <https://p-a-n.org/release/jenna-sutela-nimiia-vibie/> [Accessed: 18 Nov. 2019]

<sup>123</sup> Damien Henry, Experiments Lead at Google Arts and Culture: “It’s very important for us to work with artists because it is the opportunity to use algorithms in a way that they are not being designed for.” Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaoZV7jPo10> [Accessed: 18 Nov. 2019]

<sup>124</sup> These two uses also allow Sutela’s work to situate, or rather *distribute*, the human

recording the bacterial movements is trained to encode them to a *high dimensional latent space* where the movements can be traced and rendered as a system: a message is channeled from a non-speaking entity. From this, a kind of alien ‘handwriting’ is decoded and presented through the *nimiia cétii* film (Fig. 7).



Figure 7.  
Jenna Sutella, 2018, *nimiia cétii* (still).

Machine Learning processes, or, what Sutela refers to as “the computer shaman” seeing as the computer possesses the shamanic capacity of “transversal communication between incommunicables” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014: 151), provides the protocols through which a collision of 19<sup>th</sup> century Martian séances and a pro-biotic bacterium produces a kind of superposition, or, Laruelle’s “cognition of the third kind.” For a new and incomprehensible language is indeed abstracted and produced according to nonhuman systems. What is crucial to emphasise here is that Sutela is not guilty of a ‘mystic

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“sovereign-subject” across a continuum that works through the invisible gut-biome activity of humans-as-holobiont and beyond the human terrestrial home. Furthermore, just as the compositing of multiple perspectives Holder achieves in *Adcredo*, I argued, permits a scaffolding of perception towards looking and thinking with the conjunctive logic of *superposition*, Sutela’s work here enables a vastly *multi-scalar* perspective that aligns heterogeneous elements across a continuum that reach from the microscopic to the cosmic. Acknowledging this continuum, and locating ourselves within it, scaffolds a re-building of one’s sensorium or *Umwelt* as capable of parsing significance and multiple nonhuman scales, substantiating some concretely potential faculties of a possible “speculative subject” (Catren) or “Alien-subject” (Laruelle).

fundamentalism’ whereby inherited spiritualist, shamanic, occult or mystic semiotics are simply mimicked. Instead, *nimiia cétii* and *nimiia vibié* generate a nonhuman language that acts as a cognitive scaffolding for speculative thinking around these new technologies,<sup>125</sup> as well as the provenance and microbial genealogy of our own biological and ‘human’ bodies.

“forget ([“language”, “code”])  
# forgetting language  
# forgetting code  
stutter ([“our”, “way”, “to”, “divinity”])  
# o—our  
# w-ww-www-way  
# ttt---to  
# d--d-divinity” (Sutela, 2019)

What this thesis ultimately posits for the work of the speculative turn, is that the disparate forms or texts produced by individual artists with uniquely forged perspectives, positions, and often neologistic fidelities (see Eshun 2017) is an *uneven and combined heresy*. Mulholland (2019b) differentiates the pedagogical trend motivating art schools’ modern tradition of fostering “a personalised ontology” summed up by the institutional inscription “you are an artist,” while the university by contrast intones that “you may make a contribution to your discipline,” productive of “a commons of collective wisdom” (26). However, what the work of the speculative turn demonstrates is rather a significant complication of the tenor and makeup of the phrase, *you* are and *artist*: the singular individual, the “sovereign-subject” is an orthodox and humanist fiction, replaced by a dynamic, mutable, and precarious assemblage of relata. It is replaceable with speculative fictions.<sup>126</sup> And, furthermore, while the university, as Mulholland has it, circumscribes a matrix of possible disciplines and methods by which one may “contribute,” the model of *mystics*

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<sup>125</sup> “the work is also about intelligent machines as aliens of our creation. There’s an interesting link between the project of talking with aliens and the problem of talking with machines. We built (at least some of) the aliens ourselves and now the challenge is to understand the nonhuman condition of these machines that work as our interlocutors and infrastructure” (Sutela in Obrist and Vickers, 2019: 141).

<sup>126</sup> I have already shown that this is not a simple process but involves a speculative *labour*.



has it that a contribution can be made via the unique configurations of potentiality embodied in its mystics. Therefore, I argue that the long tail of diverse speculative experiments produced by individual artists are indeed contributions to an iterative and reflexive *uneven and combined heresy*; a “strange science” that is tuned to the contingencies and complexities of contemporary political, technological, and climatological upheaval, as well as the refined understanding of ourselves and the world produced by the sciences. Across the field of contemporary art, concepts and models that represent the body (the liberal humanist sovereign subject) and the body politic (formulations of togetherness) are revised, worked, shared, examined, re-figured, and evaluated in an active and distributed act of social manipulation.

Sutela’s projects do not aim to promote some kind of *truth* but rather contribute to the working of concepts and models with which we can understand and inhabit the world. They are part of an uneven and combined heresy; an information processing protocol iteratively and procedurally developed by the distributed evaluation and development of contemporary art. Works such as *nimiia cétii* and *nimiia vibié* exist as inherently distributive entities whether this is through *nimiia cétii*’s appearance in various group exhibitions where it is brought into conversation as a variable among different ideas and materials or *nimiia vibié*’s circulation through the economies of domestic music consumption and music journalism. Through this distribution the works and their re-figured concepts are at once evaluated among the broader milieu of contemporary art and as speculative socio-cognitive technologies where they furnish thinking with new potentialities: this *mystics* “is a fable because it cannot claim the status of definitive truth. It is a language without obvious power. Yet paradoxically, that is its strength. It calls into question strategically defined, and apparently definitive, systems of meaning” (Sheldrake, 2001: 45).

### **3. Most Dismal Swamp: Dredging a Dank Enlightenment From a Swamp of Heresies (means going in up to the chin)**

In addition to my projects discussed so far, I developed and presented a curatorial project named *Most Dismal Swamp* (MDS) across two London galleries and online. While MDS continues to expand beyond the timeframe of this Ph.D. as well as the remit of its thesis, I will focus on MDS' two inaugural projects, *Swamp Protocol* (2019) and *Whale Fall* (2019).<sup>127</sup> With MDS I led the research and thinking of this Ph.D. thesis towards new methods and conclusions that I argue are highly significant for discussing and advancing the work of the speculative turn.

This final section functions as an introduction to the speculative methods, work, and overall significance of the MDS project. Here, I will outline what MDS is and how it has, firstly, led the research of this thesis; secondly, provided a site for further experimentation and implementation of the ideas I have already discussed, and lastly, how it functions as a speculative socio-cognitive tool; how it “emits” and “works” concepts as a cognitive scaffold. This section is then both a future-oriented conclusion that presents a model for curatorial-artistic practice that rigorously engages with and advances the work of the speculative turn, and it is also an introduction for couching a considerable portion of this Ph.D. thesis portfolio and the lexicon/concepts this emits - projects that were formulated, researched and developed through 2018 and presented in 2019.

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<sup>127</sup> See *Most Dismal Swamp*, *Swamp Protocol*, and *Whale Fall* sections of the portfolio PDF and the relevant folders of material in the accompanying USB drive.

There is information conveyed through the portfolio that does allow these projects to ‘speak for themselves’ - the present section is an extrapolation of this information that *demonstrates* and *analyses* the deformation and subversion of conceptual apparatus they foster. Eshun’s *More Brilliant* for example is a methodological ally for this section: *More Brilliant* is to Black Music what the *Dank Enlightenment* is to selected work of the speculative turn. *More Brilliant* and the *Dank Enlightenment* name aggregate “theoretical installations” (Laruelle), built from materials, their concepts, and their concept-work: they are strange sciences that although they work with fictions, they are not fictions.<sup>128</sup> Which is to say that it is not an inherited category but rather something that is ‘emitted’ by their collective labour and rationality. This Dank Enlightenment will be elucidated in the final section via the work of the ‘patron saint of swamps’ Henry David Thoreau and with direct reference to the MDS projects included in the portfolio.

Given that the material within the portfolio presents its own speculative use of concepts and language, I will also allow a more sober and analytic tone to merge with the concepts these projects “emit;” I will allow the language and conceptual schema of this thesis to become “weirded” by its content.<sup>129</sup> This is to allow the for the consideration of and the taking-root of more speculative propositions and refigurations. *More Brilliant*, like Laruelle, articulates theory as translated and mutated by the affective and conceptual vectors of Black Music: Eshun builds a language and a syntax with these materials. And so in this section, I methodologically open up the discussion of relevant concepts, analyses, and arguments to the properties of what I call the “swampscape.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> “Rather than fictionalizing science, a mysticism for today would have to Weird it” (Wilk, 2019: n.p.). Ben Woodward has discussed speculation’s capacities in the “weirding” of philosophy (referring to the work of Laruelle as much as the category of Weird fiction synonymous with horror writers such as H. P. Lovecraft) insomuch as a “mad speculation” incurs philosophy-proper to become “less reliant on the stability of its own concepts and more adherent to exposing a particular horrifying swath of reality” (Woodward, 2011: 5).

<sup>129</sup> See footnote 128 on “weirding.”

<sup>130</sup> Philosopher Nicola Masciandaro has expressed this dynamic with regards to the studious “participation” with theory-fiction and the genre of Black Metal (rather than propagating an orthodox form of philosophy *about* these materials): “Black metal theory expresses a need to reopen music to the philosophy of music and philosophy to the music of philosophy *in a black way*” (Masciandaro in Irtenkauf and Masciandaro, 2014: 237, emphasis added); “theory-fiction as the *mutual hostage-taking* of theory and fiction” (Masciandaro, 2011). See also previous instance of Beech’s discussion on “the force of materials as condition of the concept.” (Beech, 2013: 85)

This written section, and a work such as *More Brilliant*, then embodies Whitehead's aeronautic simile for describing the method of speculation in that it exemplifies the "land[ing] for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation" *after* having made its "flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization." I will demonstrate how this method is, crucially, *navigational* and *transformational* as suggested by Whitehead.

### 3.1 The Swampscape Model: a 'protean cartographic hologram'<sup>131</sup>

Having conjured the image of a "post-digital swampscape" in the research and press release that accompanied my *Vaporents* project, I invested in interrogating what this image could mean and in developing its speculative potency further. This decision presented the thesis research with an opportunity to consider the significance of 'the swamp' as a navigational model; a conceptual resource for apprehending, analysing, and speculating (in the fullest, *generative* sense that I have been outlining) with the materials of the given. And, with the opportunity to make substantial connections with this project and those also finding an implicit or explicit interest in swamps for similar reasons, including artists, curators, researchers, and institutions. With

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<sup>131</sup> In 'The Coming Anarchy' political theorist Robert Kaplan writes, "Imagine cartography in three dimensions, as if in a hologram. In this hologram would be the overlapping sediments of group and other identities atop the merely two-dimensional color markings of city-states and the remaining nations, themselves confused in places by shadowy tentacles, hovering overhead, indicating the power of drug cartels, mafias, and private security agencies. Instead of borders, there would be moving 'centers' of power, as in the Middle Ages. Many of these layers would be in motion. To this protean cartographic hologram one must add other factors, such as migrations of populations, explosions of birth rates, vectors of disease. Henceforward the map of the world will never be static. This future map—in a sense, the "Last Map"—will be an ever-mutating representation of chaos." Kaplan's commentary is here useful for understanding the significance of updating not just the content of maps, but the very model of the map as a socio-cognitive technology. His evocation of multiple and simultaneous vectors of power that are dynamic and shifting with the fluidity of communal identity and its concomitant allegiances to such powers, echoes the paradigm I argue here that is apprehended in using the swampscape model.

this research and the concurrent practical experimentation and realisation of its inferences, I asked the following questions: What might a contemporary swamp-thinking, a swamp cognitive ecology, entail? How and why would it be relevant? What could it *do* as a socio-cognitive technology and as a curatorial model? What “strange science” might emerge from the swamp? If we map the logics and potencies of the swamp on to reality as means of generating the concepts with which we apprehend the real, as per Brassier, then what kind of “space of contemplation” (de Certeau, 2015: 119) are we discussing, and what kind of contemplation is enabled? What refigurations of personhood and sociality does this conceptual model make thinkable? With this image, how might we “construct other theoretical images of theory?” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014: 77; see also footnote 130). With this model, I generate a lexicon of “new terms” and refigured concepts to find purchase among the social networks and hypereconomy of contemporary art.

The conscious endeavour of investing in this research and practical curatorial work started in earnest at the end of 2017, when I formulated two proposals outlining what I called MDS and its first two outcomes: *Swamp Protocol* (SP) and *Whale Fall* (WF) which I shared with artists and the two institutions with whom I presented these outcomes (arebyte and Gossamer Fog, London).<sup>132</sup> These first projects committed the proposed aims of MDS to practice: to present and work with contemporary art according to a novel method, to produce research, and to operate as a record label. To explain the aims and their implementation, it is best now to cover the initial theoretical formulation of this project.

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<sup>132</sup> These proposals were also reformulated as a successful funding application to ArtsCouncil England which was submitted August 2018, with funds received shortly after as the project entered the practical production phases. For a timeline of pre-production, production, post-production and presentation activity, see portfolio. Furthermore, the minor spaces that these projects inhabited (two experimental project spaces dedicated to exploring the fringes of digital cultures, my own website and social media account, and further online platforms dedicated to boosting the signal of contemporary art experiments that fly ‘under the radar’ of more visible orthodoxies – [tzvetnik.online](http://tzvetnik.online), [aqnb.com](http://aqnb.com), [ofluxo.net](http://ofluxo.net)). See footnote 120 on “privileged spaces” nourishing minor languages.

Having already given consideration to the use of the thought-image of the swamp in *Vaporents* I was already familiar with some of the potentiality of what it might mean as a model for thinking about aspects of contemporary life, for instance in the artist Femke Herregraven's invocation of swamps as a means to discuss informatic networks and the geographies of contemporary finance:<sup>133</sup>

"I am interested in the swamp's immateriality and its functions through language because, looking at it symbolically and historically, it represents a place that we morally condemn and lock out. There is sickness, insects and dirt in it... Gossip is a sort of information intelligence in a social network. By gossiping and rumouring we also, as humans, get an idea of where our position is in a social group. Recent trading algorithms are structured around how people gossip, which is symbolically connected to the swamp." (Herregraven, 2016)

Here, the swamp is a conceptual heuristic to help parse and apprehend the activities of algorithmic and financial infrastructure. On one hand, in the work *Sprawling Swamps* (2016-ongoing) it refers to the politically and geologically unstable territories where Herregraven's fictional infrastructural systems are situated, reflecting the strategic location of existing financial operations. While on another hand such a project also invokes the character of swamps, its disruption of the presumed stable binary between land and water as a way of thinking about how and where (financial) value is produced and what forms of governance are involved. My aim here is not to analyse Herregraven's work in itself, but simply to begin with a recent project that exemplifies the heuristic

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<sup>133</sup> Other artists I might refer include *Precarious Inhabitants* (2017), a video installation by Eva Papamargariti that leveraged the visual language of swamps and swamp- creatures in "addressing issues of symbiosis and transformation between human, AI machines, animals and other organic and synthetic bodies." *Danklands* (2014) by writer and artist Holly Childs maps some of the characteristics of swamps to the experience of navigating post-internet culture. Jakob Kudsk Steensen's various virtual reality and CGI explorations of wetland environments that works towards making visible the precarious ecologies and their imaginative qualities that are being eroded under climate change. And, *Swamp* (1971), a short film by Nancy Holt and Robert Smitshon which encapsulates the disorientating experience of navigating swamps. These artists, excluding the latter, each participated in the SP project. While these represent a handful of examples of contemporary and recent art's work with swamps, I will also refer to a broad corpus of work from literature, cinema, fiction, and other areas that contribute to the conceptual resources of the swamp as a thought-image.

use of the swamp as a mental model; a model that builds an understanding of something through invoking the topology, cultural histories, and imaginary of the swamp.<sup>134</sup>

However, I will dedicate remaining focus on my own extrapolation and construction of a model I have termed *swampscape* which motivated the work of MDS.

MDS is a project for simulating and exploring a pervasive contemporary ecology that I argue has come to be defined by the *entanglement* of *multiple and simultaneous* logics, systems, temporalities, and realities. Following the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's constitution of an analytic framework that foregrounds the relations between global cultural flows he terms "ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," "technoscapes," "financescapes," and "ideoscapes," (Appadurai, 1990: 6-7) MDS names and unpacks a further dimension for a contemporary speculative ecology: *swampscapes*.

This ecology, I argue, emerges from a dynamic confluence of: globally networked media and social media platforms whose algorithms have been developed to tailor search-queries and news-feeds with what is perceived to be *desirable* content for each user (built from data-aggregated user-profiles) that functions as substantial confirmation bias of individualised worldviews; and, a *naturalisation* of speculation that I have referred to as a contemporary *epistemic long tail*. The means of "eco-cognitive engineer[ing]" (Magnani, 2013: 50), whereby diverse cultural artefacts such as artworks, blog posts, misinformation, memes, and music scenes constitute stigmergic environmental modifications (in terms of being artefacts that circulate and forge varying degrees of influence within a cognitive ecology), have crossed a threshold of access towards their popular and broad, domestic implementation.

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<sup>134</sup> Such a use of the image of the swamp has also found purchase with a broader range of researchers and practitioners, as evidenced in the Lithuanian Pavilion at the 2018 Venice International Architecture Biennale, *The Swamp School*, organised and led primarily by architects Nomeda and Gediminas Urbonas.

“The other day I was tinkering around in my garage and I decided to build a new ideology,” blogged the far-right ideologue Curtis Yarvin (aka ‘Mencius Moldbug’) (Moldbug, 2007). Yarvin’s invocation of *amateurism* and *maker culture* here is indicative of emergent practices in the collective eco-cognitive engineering of new ideologies; new futures. It is symptomatic of a broadly uneven and combined heresy: an emerging *long tail* of speculative politics that aims to disrupt, re-form and hard-fork the Overton window of *viable* political discourse. It is the sweeping realisation that all things *could* and *ought* to be otherwise; that reality is revisable.

This distributed heresy is discernible in the growing public distrust and structural suspicion of technocratic regimes and establishment *doxa* (seen as elite, detached, corrupt and wielding undue authority).<sup>135</sup> What is now apparent from a glance at our contemporary mediascape is growing social fragmentation and growing investment in diverging alternative ideals whether this is actionable plans, experimental ideologies, speculative discourses, non-conforming identities, or conspiracy theories. Each belongs to a bottom-up revision of what is perceived to be the present hegemony (importantly, different tribes perceive different elites; different “cathedrals” and realities).<sup>136</sup> They are further exacerbated by the hardwiring of liberal possessive individualism and tacit online communication protocols into how public discourse plays out across a proprietary mediascape: militantly aggressive filter bubbles vying to signal-boost their homebaked truths; an arms-race to hypecraft an alternative future *doxa* – an “eco-epistemic warfare” (Magnani, 2013: 2016). Yet the present remains a swamp-like, inextricably entangled, adversarial *Mixed Reality paradigm*; “a multiplicity of rogue nows” as member of the artist collective Confraternity of Neoflagellants’ Norman Hogg puts it; a

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<sup>135</sup> de Certeau analogously describes *mystics* as a “reaction to the vanishing of truths, the increasing opaqueness of the authorities and divided or diseased institutions” (deCerteau, 1992: 14).

<sup>136</sup> Conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh as even parcelled the worlds of political discourse into “The universe of lies and the universe of reality” (Limbaugh, 2009: n.p.).



noisy *bazaar* of amateur heresies mounting in parallel against the elite *cathedral* they each variously perceive as cultural orthodoxy.

Holder's *Adcredo* illustrates this ecology in its depiction of multiple and simulatenous realities merging and mutating among one another according to the logic of digital compositing of figures and forms. We can see here an organisation of heresies according their multiple and simultaneous existence; forming a world of distinct multiple and simultaneous images of conflicting worlds. To use the term that Henry Corbin derived from Islamic philosophy, this is a *mundus imaginalis* (Corbin, 1976): "If imagination is an individual faculty and the imaginary a social context, 'imaginal' is simply what is made out of images, an adjective denoting something that can be the product of both an individual faculty and a social context" (Bottici, 2011: 63). A dense swampscape of images living in combined simultaneity among one another akin to the modes of digital compositing ubiquitous in contemporary film, and which MDS has adopted the logic and practices of in the curation/production of SP and WF: "an assemblage that constructs a set of discrete elements from different moments and sites of recording, modelling, or animation into a unified visual field" (Williams, 2017; 19). (See the below refence to *Whale Fall (lectio divina)* for my work on explicating how this logic is embedded in subjective *Umwelt*).

The term swampscape calls upon the histories, understandings and characteristics of wetlands to form a heuristic model in order to better comprehend the technical, ecological and experiential complexities of the contemporary world. As sites that have routinely been defined negatively in the west as anomalous and horrific spaces at odds with dominant images of moral, industrial and scientific progress, swamps are uniquely positioned as a rich heuristic resource: a concept-space ripe for dredging. What speculative opportunites are swampsapes harbouring?

An essential characteristic that is key to swampscales is their anomalous constitution “in a classificatory order predicated on a hard and fast distinction between land and water, time and space” (Giblett, 1996: 4). Simultaneously solid land and fluid water yet also neither, swampscales embody a topology of muddy indistinction and taxonomic heresy.<sup>137</sup> This is relevant for understanding a contemporary condition that has emerged from the teleology of modernity and the fragmentation of postmodernity, into the *entangled simultaneity* of multiple, nested logics: a quantum ecology that blurs, combines and superposes fact and fiction, nature and culture, technology and the occult, past and future, authentic and synthetic, work and play, science and mysticism, self and other, “the dry world of virtuality and the wet world of biology” (Ascott, 2001: 9), online and offline, human and nonhuman. Instead of legitimising a binary thinking, these terms rather mutate and constitute an explosion of complex new relations. These relations (and how they relate) must be parsed in order to navigate the *multi-reality biome*, the *Mixed Reality paradigm*, of swampscales with any agency.

Regarding the architecture of this Mixed Reality paradigm as a “heretical ecology,” see the film essay I made and included in the portfolio: *Whale Fall (lectio divina mix)*.<sup>138</sup> The visual component of this film is material taken from both SP and WF as well as additional footage and title cards (Fig. 8).

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<sup>137</sup> I do not invoke a ‘muddy indistinction’ as a vagary, or a mystification but rather as a conceptual resource. Also, this kind of viscous indistinction might also be utilised in order to question Appadurai’s description of ‘cultural flows’ in terms of what MDS calls an *ideology of fluidity* secreted within such language. Evocations of ‘fluidity’ and ‘flows’ in the language of art, criticism, technology commentary and business is ubiquitous – is it indeed accurate or appropriate? I propose that it is indicative of a post-political inclination to veil the cultural and structural restrictions that commonly impede social and economic mobility.

<sup>138</sup> WF\_ Lectio Divina Remix.mp4 in the portfolio

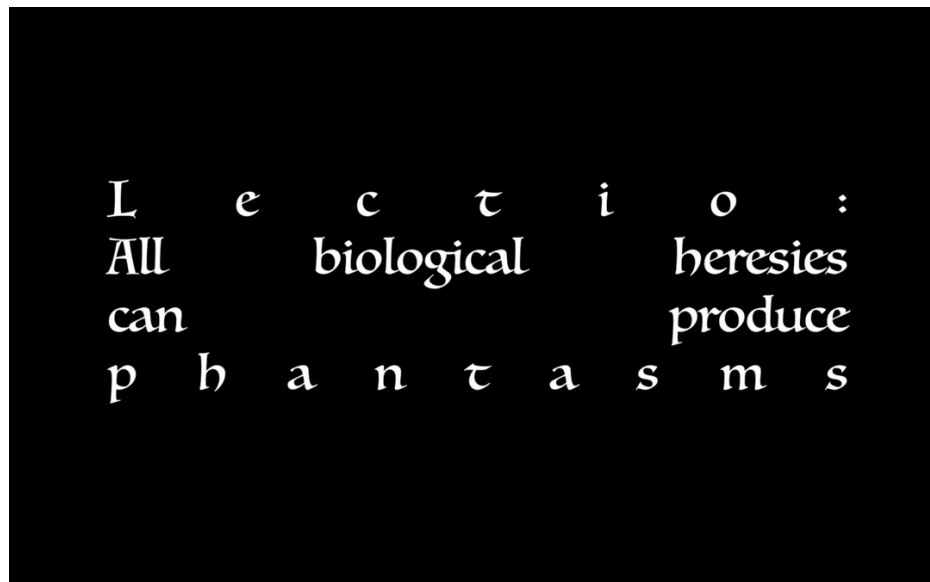


Figure 8.  
Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Whale Fall (lectio divina mix)* (still), Most Dismal Swamp, London.

In terms of outlining this multi-reality biome and its heretic ecology of inhabitants, I may refer to exhibitions such as the aforementioned *Les Immatériaux* which actively investigated the impact of, and the shifting contingencies of, materials within a context of informatics. More recent examples which produce a vivid map of the swampscape’s holographic and quantum topology include *Ambient Intelligence* (2017) curated by Felice Moramarco, which in working with Sutela, Holder, and Anna Mikkola, described the “convergence of nature and computation [which] brings about what has been called a new ecological paradigm, which is the result of the multiplicity of natural and artificial, human and non-human agents.” With ‘swampscape’ I am providing a model for apprehending and working with such an ecological paradigm that is composed of a dynamic multitude of new materials, new intelligences, and new realities.

This brings up a further key attribute of swampscales: their adverse navigational conditions. The uncertain terrain that swallows the tracks and restricts the progress of those who aim to forge a path through these spaces has long been a subject of aberration in western cultures. But, MDS explores the disorientation associated with swampscales’ erasure of “established classical

concepts of vista, horizon and landscape” (Fritzell, 1974: 530) as a modality of re-orientation; as a condition for *thinking in multiple dimensions*. Such an exploration will help to develop methods of navigating the hyper-baroque architectures of extraterritorial geopolitics, fictional infrastructures, legal mystifications, ambient intelligences and adversarial virtualities. What kind of reasoning, intuition, speculation, navigation, solidarities, altered states of consciousness and communication may emerge? Might some collective project of Dank Enlightenment be fostered?

### 3.2 The Invention of a (Strange) Science (part 2): Dank Enlightenment

*“Instead of piling on more hybrids, exceptions and anomalies, we need a glossary for a new normal, and for its design and redesign” (Bratton, 2017: 10).*

*“Can we aspire to Enlightenment without modernity? My hypothesis... is that we are going to have to slow down, reorient and regulate the proliferation of monsters by representing their existence officially” (Latour, 1997: 12).*

*“The empirical basis of objective science has, thus, nothing absolute about it. Science doesn’t rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structures of its theories rises above a swamp, like a building erected on piles driven down from above into the swamp” (Popper, 2005: 94).*

Among his numerous publications and journals, the 19th century poet, philosopher, and ‘patron saint of swamps,’ Henry David Thoreau documented the occasion of his near-complete physical immersion into one of the various swamps he explored. Content and up to his chin in mud; sense and thought disoriented in the thick tangle of a “dismal” environment. Content amid the indistinct and wild slurry. Content in “scenting the wild honeysuckle and bilberry blows, and lulled by the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes.” Such ardent immersion exemplified his unorthodox approach as a scientific thinker –

a rational materialist that would earnestly describe “a swamp as a sacred place, *a sanctum sanctorum*” (Thoreau, 2017: 75). A strange science whose laboratory was a sacred space of reflection; a cognitive scaffold comprised of dynamic “alembics and cucurbits” (Lavoisier) of wild honeysuckle, bilberry blows, the minstrelsy of gnats and mosquitoes.

Thoreau’s method defined him as a committed *immersant* within a reality set apart from, and in resistance to, the insatiable progress of the world of western modernity: for the improper ground of the marshes and their pestilent dangers such as malaria, or ‘swamp fever,’ was often proven as “the great original obstacle to progress” (Beloc, 1923: 14). Yet, importantly, his method was not one devoid of systematic reasoning, nor removed from enlightened public discourse. Through his experimentally multi-modal work encompassing romantic poetry, political essay, personal reflection and historical analysis he forged a speculative mission that sought to explore how the poetic, the scientific, the human, the nonhuman, nature, and culture might be re-ordered and re-combined by his perception of the swamp as a potent space of elemental transformation:

“Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps... When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest woods the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp... out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey” (Thoreau, 2017: 73)

This view from the swamp; from the faithful immersion into its deep, ancient bogs, provides a perspective infected by an intense intimacy. From here Thoreau sees in the tangled weeds: “healing herbs;” in the intoxicating swamp gas and miasma: the “night thoughts of earth;” in the swamp: a “temple” (Thoreau, 1980: 238-449). And conversely, from his perspective a suspicion of modern institutions is fermented: “what would become of us if we took our walks in a mall?” (Thoreau, 2017: 40).

Reverently submerged in the vegetal morass, in the noise of the swamp, Thoreau’s approach and protocol can be understood as an inflection of that other “strange science” which de Certeau named *mystics* and the strange sciences of contemporary art’s speculative information processing protocols.

Among the aspects of *mystics* that de Certeau outlines, attention is paid to it as “a manner of using received language *differently*.” It is this (mis)use of the established language, symbols and concepts of their faith that marked the mystics as heretics: those who defy the orthodoxy of the church not by any desire to destroy it but to *transform* and *mutate* the institutional narratives and practices that dominate their spiritual life. Their heresy was thus not destructive in character, but speculative. Such transformations were practiced through a radically intimate commitment to their faith, and that their faith might transcend the boundaries of orthodox enclosure; an immersion into the ecstasy of divine communion that the church saw as undermining their authority as mediator of the gospel. Sense and thought disoriented in the ecstatic intoxication of divine experience. Religious doctrine tainted with *mystics*’ use of the deviant views of science, philosophy and direct, *transformational* experience. While Thoreau has conventionally been associated with practices of ‘walking’ and romantic perceptions of losing oneself in nature, here I am concerned with his more radical re-figuring of a “swampspeak” (enabled more accurately by *immersion* rather than simply ‘walking’) and what this means for the potential for a concomitant *Dank Enlightenment* harboured in the work of MDS (that is, a system of thinking and lexicon re-figured among the contemporary swampscape, as Thoreau’s thought and “swampspeak” was re-figured among environments such as Walden Pond).

*Mystics*, in the 16th and 17th centuries, as outlined by de Certeau, was like a distributed laboratory or think-tank engaging the unsanctioned and disparate voices of those creating new, experimental forms of reason – both lay and specialist. Both the work of Thoreau and that of *mystics* then, are examples of truly “experimental sciences” with their subjects so deeply immersed in their objects of study, that their practitioners, and their disciplines, as Thoreau states, are fundamentally recreated. Their product was a *new corpus*; a re-combined, re-constituted, re-formed, language and system. As de Certeau calls it, a “teratological language;” a monstrously chimeric conjunction and mutation of given forms. While the practitioners of *mystics* produced their heresies, Thoreau in his temple-laboratory worked towards the creation of an “eco-

logic” (Giblett, 1996: 228) by transforming the traditional (western) pejorative view of the swamp.<sup>139</sup>

So, since Thoreau validly asked ‘what would become of us if we took our walks in the mall?’ what has become of the mall? Well Thoreau may already have offered an answer that pushes towards a rudimentary understanding of the contemporary swampscape:

“let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place which we call reality.” (Thoreau, 1982: 350)

This is to say that the characteristics of swamps provide a useful lens with which to re-consider the contemporary world and its institutions: “the bogs and quicksands of society.” This manifests not only in the swamp’s physical makeup, but also in its histories, lore, and cultures.

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<sup>139</sup> “Thoreau values precisely those usual pejorative connotations” (Giblett, 1996: 233). Thoreau’s lexicon is littered with a combination of sacralising and pejorative terms, the latter of which have resulted in a common language, or “swampspeak” (Giblett, 1996: 8) of dismal or fetid atmospheres as well as monsters, danger and disease. Such a cultural rendering of swamps has emerged from centuries of colonial frustration with the swamp’s supposed recalcitrance or its inherent difference from the Decisional apparatus of modernity: the calculable value of discrete entities. While Giblett notes that Thoreau does indeed “subvert” such tropes (229-235), I would add to this that there is a notable form of *superposition* happening in Thoreau’s writing: using a word such as Dismal, which had long been a word associated with swamps through everything from poetry to scientific reports, rather than a word like ‘beautiful’ (which inheres to a value system and a Decisional apparatus distinct from the swamp itself), is to encourage such a word to be more than one thing simultaneously – much like the muddy indistinction of the swamp, and my own swampscape model, itself. Thoreau’s usage embodies a “culturing of language by the wetland” (Ryan, 2020: 75) akin to the mutation of concepts, language and syntax by the transcendental immanence of Laruelle’s non-philosophy.

As with Thoreau's "swampspeak" (along with the proposed lineage of Allahyari's re-figuring of narratives for Middle Eastern myths from personal experience, contemporary political concerns, and oppressed voices, or Eshun's midwifery of Black Music's latent "mathemagics," or Laruelle's construction of multiple "philo-fictions" as a replacement thought-model for that of Philosophy's singular Decisional framework, or *mystics'* operation by way of a *use* of tradition and its conceptual resources in the organised fabulation of "fictive discourses in a rigorous theatre" of (worked) concepts), I have worked towards rendering a glossary of new and revised terms through the swampscape model and with the entanglement of various artworks towards the articulation and renewal of what Clark calls "public language," the "magic words" and external artefacts that augment human cognition (Clark, 1998; see also Wheeler, 2007 and Culpitt, 1998: 120 on the mystic "use" of language). I have named this emergent system, in the spirit of a methodologically ludic 'strange science' that is immanent to the swampscape model, Dank Enlightenment: a procedural project by which the '*entangled simultaneity* of multiple, nested logics' of the *swampscape* is parsed and analysed by the conceptual scaffolding afforded by MDS projects as speculative socio-cognitive technologies. In other words, a situated attempt to "forge the explanatory bridge from thought to being" (Brassier).

If the "night thoughts of earth" influenced the formation of Thoreau's "eco-logic,"<sup>140</sup> then the night thoughts of the *swampscape* is a Dank Enlightenment: an immersive strange science and contemporary "eco-logic" composed of the swampscape's native artefacts and socio-cognitive technologies; the native ontologies that scaffold thinking in multiple and simultaneous dimensions. To conclude the thesis I will substantiate this heuristic term with reference to some of the material-conceptual nuances in the aesthetic decisions and the technical makeup of MDS projects as "thought-images" (Beech), enabling the extrapolation and uptake of a speculative glossary; a suite of native concepts that MDS 'emits'. This rendering of a glossary resonates with the work of others I have already discussed in detail, particularly that of Eshun's concept-engineering. It is also a commitment to

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<sup>140</sup> What Thoreau means here by "night thoughts of the earth" maps directly on to the explanation of Eshun and Allahyari's (among many others') "complicity with anonymous materials" mentioned in Section 2.3, see also (Negarestani, 2011).



the analyses and conclusions made throughout the thesis by embodying a *practically* speculative model for my work.

I have already put to work a unique lexicon throughout the thesis, loading and promoting the use of terms that have either been previously un-used or under-used to discuss contemporary art, including many of my own coinage, among them: *distributed information processing protocol*, *cognitive ecology*, *socio-cognitive technology*, *combined and uneven heresy*, *working concepts*, *mystics*, *un/orthodoxy*, *Overton Window*, *transformative navigational protocols*, *multi-scalar*, *epistemic long tail*, *cognitive scaffolding*, *eco-cognitive engineering*, *thinking through things*, *expanded umwelt*, *conceptual affordances*. And, crucial to the present topic, I have already started to deploy and explain terms that *embody* Dank Enlightenment before it is *explained*: *swampscape*, *multiple and simultaneous realities*, *Mixed Reality paradigm*, *biosemiotics*, *multi-reality biome*. I will now continue, and close, with further clarification of Dank Enlightenment via the concerns and aesthetics of MDS (with reference to portfolio artefacts).

As concluded in the previous section, *thinking in multiple dimensions* is something key to navigating what I have described as the contemporary swampscape: a multi-reality biome precipitated by the social impact of the ubiquitous and commercial acceleration of CPU and GPU-power, CGI and digital compositing techniques, graphics editing software, social media platforms deploying individually-tailored feedcrafting algorithms and data-harvesting, artificial intelligence, and a broad scope of immersive virtual/augmented/mixed reality facilities (procedural compositing of virtual elements and real space using spatialised audio, eye-tracking, retinal projection and real-time spatial meshing), things such as reality and fiction or authentic and synthetic or online and offline are ever-more enmeshed. Here we have another kind of swamp, unevenly distributed and with a similarly indistinct ground; populated by avatars, data-shadows, bots, web-scrappers, and deepfakes instead of Thoreau's "minstrelsy of gnats" or von Uexküll's ticks and worms. So this *thinking in multiple dimensions* is to render thinking according to the contingencies and conceptual affordances of the swampscape.

This swamp model maps smoothly onto the definition and function of the “composite image” which film theorist Evan Calder Williams explains is “an assemblage that constructs a set of discrete elements from different moments and sites of recording, modelling, or animation into a unified visual field” (Williams, 2017: 19). These are images found across cinema, art, advertising, television, and arguably most contemporary visual culture – the composite image is an elemental and globally definitive component of technological cultures, specifically the Mixed Reality paradigm I have outlined already. They typically include elements such as human actors/models, digitally sculpted and animated 3D models, sandbox 3D virtual environments, procedural textures and procedurally-generated assets such as dust particles, filmed chroma-key surfaces upon which alternative backgrounds or images are set, and all manner of aggregated synthetic additions or edits realistically merged together by sophisticated (and relatively accessible) software.

Here I have found a core motivation in forming a novel curatorial methodology; for curating a heresy: I deliberately involved many of the above Mixed Reality and digital compositing tools or techniques in the curatorial and presentation process towards “join[ing] the discontinuous and far-flung without flattening their particularities” (21-22). In directing film shoots and virtual productions using various artist’s objects, animations, digital assets, 3D virtual environments, poetry, music, performances, costumes, etc. I have formed projects that act as *mixed reality biomes*: highly dynamic spaces where a multitude of works that each index different worlds, logics, narratives, and realities have been carefully composited together to form a single work, yet without ‘flattening their particularities’, which, in this case, involves their distinct conceptual affordances. For example, in the production of *Whale Fall* (Fig. 9), I curated and commissioned the work of 19 artists as if each of these artworks were some form of new life emerging from the carcass of a dead whale (see the discussion on decay vectors in Section 2.2.2a). The result was more of a lively festival akin to a “minstrelsy of gnats”; a multitude of *umwelten* flourishing in this strange environment. This image might also be deemed heresy by the orthodox means of curating artworks as clearly labelled discrete entities that remain separate and thus create their own separate zones of reflection and distance for a viewer – a mode attuned to and reproductive of

the liberal humanist subject.



Figure 9.

Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Whale Fall*

Still shows work by Hannah Rose Stewart, Marta Strazicic, Tea Strazicic, and Theo Triantafyllidis.

Furthermore, this method of *composite curating* was also applied in further ways during the production and presentation of *WF*. In making the digital ‘club’ depicted in Fig.9, I discussed with the artist Hannah Rose Stewart how the textures of this asset could also contain works by other contributors: I commissioned @baojiaxiang to design posters and flyers for fictional club nights using images provided by Department of Decay – these works were then embedded in the textures of the walls that Stewart produced for her digital models. When the project was presented at Gossamer Fog, I commissioned Stewart to create high-resolution versions of these textures that I printed as large-scale wallpaper sections to be applied to the gallery walls (Fig. 10). As suggested regarding the ‘particularities’ of these composited artworks, models such as Stewart’s club and her animated alien dancing creatures still maintained relative autonomy in terms of representing and calling towards ideas of non-human communities emerging from and inhabiting marginal and strange spaces; spaces that may have once been made for humans such as the dilapidated club she built.



Figure 10.

Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Whale Fall* installation view. Wallpaper by Hannah Rose Stewart; screen shows procedurally animated version of *Whale Fall* by Christsopher MacInnes; floor littered with flyers designed by @baojiaxiang and garments by MBI Wetware.

In these densely composited scenes, recombining artists' works in moving image and in bespoke gallery installation, I aimed to produce *compression fields* or temporary *mixed reality biomes* (terms of my own immanently constructed *unorthodox vocabulary*, see below for more on these) that also draw viewers into them as complicit actors; as entities living among these dynamically 'weird' and 'heretic' ecologies. In attempting to achieve this I drew upon and implemented lessons explored in the *Vaporents* project and in *Les Immatériaux*, in terms of the use of immersion and disorientation as useful modes of engagement (as well as key characteristics of swamps and their traversal). As well as the modes of compositing exemplified in the fine-tuned compositing of digital assets in real-life filmed situations such as the digital models of Lara Joy Evans and David Atlas (Fig. 11); overlaying various images in the editing process; combining and entangling artist works as described above; sequentially cutting between different artworks; filming various works in one scene or shot; and the game engine environments such as the whale fall scene I directed and the Virtual Reality recording by Jakob Kudsk Steensen, it was also key to these projects to decide upon means by which an atmospheric immersion would be achieved. Consequently, the versions of *SP* and *WF* presented as installations at arebyte and Gossamer Fog, respectively, differed from their counterparts that could live online in

perpetuity (the versions included in the portfolio USB). With *SP* I designed an installation that distributed the filmed elements over various screens, including one multi-projection screen composed of a custom aspect-ratio (utilising neural processing to expand the central image of the film outwards to the edges of the frame), six linked screens I embedded in the floor in order to resemble pools of imagery, and lastly, a spatialised 8-channel version of the soundtrack by producer Anni Nops (Fig. 12-13). An aesthetic-curatorial choice was made here to attempt to alter the space of viewer contemplation, from something that is traditionally distanced to something that is much more involving, even overwhelming (physically and even mentally, in terms of the potential for disorientation and information compression).



Figure 11.  
Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Swamp Protocol*  
Still shows 3D model by David Atlas composited in filmed location.





Figure 12.

Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Swamp Protocol* installation view. Anni Nops spatialised sound installation, Most Dismal Swamp screens.



Figure 13.

Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Swamp Protocol* installation view. Anni Nops sound installation, Most Dismal Swamp screens.

In addition to creating physically immersive and atmospheric presentation spaces, that aimed to engender a feeling of immersion into another thick and swampy reality, the “dramaturgy of information” (Lyotard) was also played out at the level of aesthetic choices made during the post-production process of finalising the films (editing, visual effects, digital compositing). In planning this process, I paid attention to Williams’ reflection

on recent cinema, specifically that of the 2014 blockbuster, *300: Rise of an Empire*:

"Space is no longer presented as a semi-coherent volume, or even a determinate plane with suspicious depth. Instead, it is a liquid quality of attention that condenses and pools around individual gestures, magnetically sucked toward that which compels it and causes the advance of time to itself halt, before being shoved away again to the next sight in a continual whiplash of redirection and speed ramps" (Williams, 2017: 203)

From this analysis of cinematic technique (that is intended to affectively charge the audience and physically immerse them within a scene's frenetic action) I explored the possibility in presenting artworks in a way that, like the disorienting horizonless space of swamps, made the space they shared ambiguous, an "incoherent volume" that the viewer would share with them. Particularly in *SP* I experimented with making this process seem more viscous and slow than fast and frenetic (Fig. 14). Here, I attempt producing a disorienting/re-orienting *compression field* in which art is presented – an ambiguous plane lacking in the depth of field required to make proper (navigational) sense of what lies ahead, as if immersed among the thick tangles and sprawling muddy indistinction of a swamp.



Figure 14.  
Most Dismal Swamp, 2019, *Swamp Protocol*  
Still shows performance by Lea Collet and Marios Stamatis, poetry fragment by Holly Childs

Furthermore, using features in post-production suites such as the 'emboss' tool,

which is used to give the illusion of selected areas in the image 3D depth, were employed for the reasons that a) they can be combined with other tools easily yet are still somewhat recognisable as an *artificial* addition which I aimed to make clear, and b) when applied to a moving image the tool does not distinguish the depth of field in the image with the same acuity as the human eye, resulting in a more spatially ambiguous and even flattened image. This tool was used in different ways to experiment with depth and how this affects a natural sense of orientation in navigating a space. And, this also adds to my next point in terms of further encouraging ambiguity between the distinctions of (filmed or CGI) environments and artworks – performances, objects, digital assets, environments and more are more effectively entangled upon the screen, creating an extreme composite.

In a 2007 article that challenges the “orthodoxy” of noise music and its formal commitments as a “genre predicated on the negation of genre” (Brassier, 2007: 167), Brassier explores how his chosen noise-music examples “forcefully short-circuit incommensurable genres” by presenting a “surfeit of information” traversing “dub cut-up, free-glam, and electro-acoustic punk... cartoon musique concrete and slapstick art-brut” towards the “production of hitherto unknown genres” (167-73). In this formulation I find an opportunity to entangle the multitude of “impossible” (172) realities, logics, and worlds indexed by the many artists that are part of *SP* and *WF* (the number of artists and collaborators was certainly significant to presenting a final ‘surfeit of information’, especially when inhabiting a shared ambiguous space. Here is where I emerge with the term *mixed reality biome* as a concept emitted by the work of MDS – a model for apprehending an environment composed of multiple and simultaneous heresies, consistent with both Brassier’s litany of genre-compounds as well as the subcultures and micro-movements listed by Eshun in Chapter 1.

With these projects, I have started an ongoing curatorial-artistic project where I explore and amplify the terms of what I have outlined as a *Mixed Reality paradigm*, by way of deploying my conceptual model of the *swampscape*. The swampscape model gives form to the abstract and complex realities of the lived experiences of a networked ‘new normal’ – allowing these realities to be parsed and understood in *new terms* and as a narrative that



renders them swamp-like; by making use of the swamp as a tool – a culturally loaded conceptual tool. This system of understanding I have named *Dank Enlightenment* – a ludic exploration that is motivated by the various artists and artefacts that contribute to this way of thinking and have already appeared in MDS projects and in this thesis. As I have already discussed in terms of ExC and cognitive ecologies that distribute thinking among artefacts, environment, and various external things, Dank Enlightenment is the latent conceptual affordances ‘emitted’ by the artefacts, environment, and various external things that comprise this mixed reality paradigm. MDS is my attempt to contribute translatable artefacts and socio-cognitive technologies that draw attention to this reality and to boost its native mode of thinking: that of thinking in multiple and simultaneous dimensions, which has drawn my work towards speculating via composite images, producing mixed reality biomes, and curating heresies.

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